SAFE KABBALAH

PART ONE
OPENING THE GATES

BY

HESCHEL GREENBERG

INTRODUCTION

These days everybody is writing about Kabbalah. Just recently Newsweek did an article on Kabbalah's popularity among celebrities. So why do we need one more book?

The current popularity of Kabbalah, although gratifying, has given rise to a good deal of apprehension among educators versed in Jewish mysticism. Simply stated, much of what is being peddled as Kabbalah is simply not safe. Very often an author mixes Kabbalah with New Age philosophies and non-Judaic, principally Eastern, religions that may be pagan in origin. The unsuspecting student develops a totally distorted picture of Kabbalah. Other texts present Kabbalah without compromising it but are too abstruse for the average reader. When the reader who is searching for meaning in life and for a deeper appreciation of Judaism encounters the confounding jargon of unadulterated Kabbalah, he becomes frustrated and his attempt at finding meaning is undermined.

In my classes on Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew High of Buffalo I strove to expose my students to a religion that is profound and relevant at the same time. In contrast to the watered-down religious education most young adults receive, I endeavored to show them a deeper side of belief. My aim was to offer them knowledge so exciting that they would never feel the need to look elsewhere to find mysticism and spirituality. (Are you still giving these classes? If so, this would be better in the present tense.)

This book grew out of those classes and my concern for providing an "untainted" yet accessible version of Kabbalah for my students.

The book is the first of four volumes, each addressing different aspects of Kabbalah:

The first volume, titled "Opening the Gates," is a general introduction to Kabbalah - what it is and what it is not. Basic questions -- Why was Kabbalah always a secret? Why is it now being taught openly? and Isn't Kabbalah dangerous? -- are explored in detail.

The second volume entitled "The Fourth Dimension," is devoted to understanding

Kabbalah's relationship to other dimensions of Jewish knowledge and introduces an entirely new way of viewing the Bible and its many levels of interpretation.

The third volume entitled "Where are We Going?", explores the way Kabbalah deals with the most fundamental questions of man's existence and purpose in life. These questions lead to discussions of an afterlife, heaven and hell, reincarnation, the Messianic Age, and the Resurrection of the Dead.

The fourth volume entitled "Entering the Gates: Meditation for Everyone," is devoted to a unique, safe form of meditation based on classical Kabbalistic sources.

It is my fervent hope that these introductory works will help spread the light and warmth of what has been called "the soul of Judaism." And may this meager contribution of light dispel the remaining darkness of exile and bring about the Messianic age imminently!

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Heschel Greenberg

Buffalo, New York

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After expressing my feelings of gratitude to the A-mighty for everything, it is my duty to give thanks to my teachers, who have given me the skills, knowledge and capability to put this book into writing. Above all, I must express gratitude to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose contribution to the field of popularizing the mystical dimension of Judaism - as well as virtually every other field of Jewish scholarship - is unmatched. I relied greatly on his prolific output (over 200 volumes) for many of the concepts presented in this book.

I would also like to dedicate this book to the memory of my esteemed parents, Rabbi Meir and Rebbetzin Beila Malkah Greenberg of blessed memory, who were also my teachers and mentors and were the first to introduce me to the world of Kabbalah and Chassidism.

Last, but not least, I must thank my wife, Leah, and our dear children, Yehoshua Falk, Levi Yitzchak, Menachem Mendel, Alizah Rochel, Chaya Sarah, Boruch Sholom, Pesha, Channah,

Nochum, Mushka and Ita and their families, may they be well, for their devotion and love.

May G-d grant them good health, joy, happiness and constant spiritual growth. And may we all merit the Redemption, imminently!

SAFE KABBALAH
PART ONE:
OPENING THE GATES

CHAPTER ONE
THE HIDDEN TREASURE

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People have always sought the mysterious and the mystical. We climb mountains, open new frontiers and explore outer space, constantly in search of other worlds "out there." Our inner space beckons us, too. That's why books on New Age spirituality and science fiction top the best seller's lists and why respectable people spend money on psychics, look for UFOs and join organizations devoted to the paranormal.

We are never content with what we have and what we know. What is it about the unknown that intrigues us?

According to Jewish mysticism, our preoccupation with the unknown stems from the unmet needs of the soul. The soul is a part of G-d. Before the soul descends to the physical world, it enjoys a totally spiritual existence beyond our comprehension. When the soul enters the body, it cannot fully express itself

and enjoy the spiritual fulfillment it knew before. The soul feels like it's in prison. Most of us are not sophisticated enough - in the spiritual sense - to appreciate what the soul really wants. So when the soul has an urge, the body is unable to respond appropriately. The body just feels that something is missing.

The soul essentially lacks two things: freedom and spiritual pleasure.

We want to be free because the soul wants to be free. Freedom is consequently one of the most cherished of human aspirations; many people would even die for it. But because we are unable to grasp the kind of freedom the soul desires, when this yearning filters from the soul into our consciousness, we feel like breaking out of whatever conventions appear to be limiting us, even if they are there for our own good.

This helps explain the phenomenon of the rebellious movements of the 1960s. Whether the youth of the '60s were involved in radical protest, drug experimentation, the sexual "revolution," religious cults, communes, social movements or a thousand other activities, their souls were on fire. Their souls wanted to break

out of the barriers of material existence. Their souls wanted to bust open the shackles of their bodies' egocentric existence. But because they were never exposed to a body of knowledge that properly explained the soul's mission in a physical world, they expressed their soul's desire to break through its limitations by joining these counterculture movements.

Just as the soul yearns to break free from the material constraints of this world, it thirsts for the spiritual nourishment it received in the world it came from. The body, unable to appreciate the type of pleasure that will satisfy the soul's yearning, craves material pleasure instead. When our only reference is the realm outside of the soul's, we will inevitably try anything that will enhance our pleasure in a vain attempt to mollify our soul, the ultimate end being hedonism or, at the least, the need to be perpetually entertained.

So, ironically, the more the 1960s revolutionaries tried to find substitutes that would satisfy the soul's need to break out of the barriers imposed by material existence and to find delight in the spiritual, the further away they were from realizing their souls' needs and

desires. Although the revolutionary climate of the '60s is behind us, its impetus did not die. Instead of seeking pleasure in radical forms, "Generation X" and the Millennials finds their fulfillment in entertainment. The obsessive need for entertainment appears to be a less destructive means of satisfying the craving of the soul, but it is no less unsettling.

The difference between the '60s and the '90s and beyond is like the difference between clean heroin and dirty heroin. Dirty heroin will kill you right away, while the sanitized version will do it slowly. As we inundate our souls with more and more entertainment, the soul becomes desensitized to spiritually. This is not what the soul wants.

The Princess Wants to Go Home

There is a beautiful parable that illustrates our point.

A princess falls in love with the King's gardener, a mere peasant. When the king discovers this romance he tells his daughter in no uncertain terms that he will never allow her to marry a

peasant. But she feels that love conquers all, and so she elopes with the gardener.

For several weeks the ardor lifts her off her feet, but as these romantic feelings dissipate with the passage of time, she begins to experience feelings of discontent and yearns to be back with her father the King in the royal palace.

At the dinner table one evening, the princess inadvertently lets out a sigh. Her sensitive husband realizes that something is wrong and asks his beloved wife what is troubling her. Not wanting to bother her husband, she says that everything is fine. However, the sensitive husband knows better and concludes that it is the short supply of potatoes in the house that is causing her misery. So he goes out to the garden, digs up all of the potatoes and presents them to his wife.

"Here, my love, this is what you were lacking ..."

The same scene repeats itself night after night: the princess sighs, her husband inquires as to her well-being, she says nothing is wrong, and to make her happy he presents her carrots, onions, turnips and parsnips until he has dug

up his entire garden. When all of this does not satisfy his wife, he exclaims in exasperation: "What is it that you want, my love? What is it that you lack? What more can I give you that will allay your pain?"

The princess answers wistfully, "The problem is that what I want and what I need you cannot even understand ..."

Our soul has certain needs that cannot possibly be comprehended by the body. Until the needs are satisfied, the soul cannot grow. Political movements, cults, drugs, sex and entertainment cannot alleviate the soul's aching for spiritual pleasure and freedom.

The Treasure Is In Your Own Back Yard

Back in the '70s, when young people were becoming involved in Eastern cults, a concerned Jewish student approached me to help get his friend out of one such cult. As we discussed the tragedy that had befallen the student's friend, I expressed consternation that this young man felt he had to join a cult to get spiritual satisfaction when Judaism had so much to offer.

I was stunned by the student's matter-of-fact reply: "Judaism has nothing to offer."

A generation has been raised in a spiritual vacuum. For many, bodily pleasures and pleasure-giving distractions are sufficient to quiet the soul's discontent, as they were for the student who told me he felt Judaism had no value. His friend's soul, on the other hand, was getting its message across loud and clear. It was crying: "I am unhappy! Do something!" Unfortunately, he chose membership in a cult to satisfy the yearnings of his soul. Actually, the student who was trying to help his friend out of the cult was in even greater trouble. His soul was so submerged in materialism that its cries were completely stifled.

What both students did not know, because nobody ever told them, was that their own religion offers all the riches imaginable. A story called "Reb Yekel and the Hidden Treasure" illustrates this point.

Reb Yekel, the pauper of Krakow, dreams of a treasure buried beneath the earth near the bridge leading into Prague. Yekel sets out on a long trek until he arrives in Prague. He surveys the area, trying to determine where to start

digging. Suddenly he is seized by the local militia and charged with espionage.

"No, I am innocent!" he protests. "I was just searching for a treasure that I dreamed I would find here."

The guard breaks into derisive laughter.

"Are you really so crazy that you would travel for days because of dream about a treasure that doesn't exist? Why, if I would be as foolish as you, I would have followed my dream: Last night I dreamt that I would find a treasure underneath the oven in the house of a certain Jew from Krakow named Yekel. Am I going to be crazy and travel to Krakow to find the treasure? Ha, ha, ha ...!"

Thereupon, Reb Yekel returns home, digs underneath his oven and finds a treasure that makes him rich ...

Jewish mysticism is the hidden treasure that we have in our own back yards. To be sure, all of Judaism is a treasure, but the ultimate expression of the soul-satisfying dimension of Judaism is in the mystical tradition, which, when accessed properly, is the means to reach the higher dimensions of existence where the

soul wants to be. Jewish mysticism is the safe way to facilitate the soul's quest. We will explore how and why this is so in the coming chapters.

There is, alas, a harmful side to Jewish mysticism, too. When not accessed properly, Jewish mysticism can be deleterious to our physical and spiritual well-being. We'll leave that discussion for the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

DANGERS AND DISTORTIONS

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Mysticism: A Definition

Mysticism is, first and foremost, the belief that there is more to life than meets the eye. Belief in G-d is primarily a mystical notion, because it asserts the existence of "something out there" that we cannot see or relate to through our senses and faculties. Mysticism acknowledges and explicates higher dimensions of existence; any concept or entity that is not part of the physical universe can be said to fall within the purview of mysticism.

Contrary to the view of many historians, Judaism is a patently mystical religion. Their contention that Judaism was originally a legal/ethical tradition, and that mysticism was introduced into Judaism at a later date, is clearly refuted by even a cursory survey of the biblical text. Even a child can see that the Bible is a thoroughly mystical document. G-d

communicates with man and man with G-d throughout the Bible, an obvious indication of the Bible's mystical content. The revelation of G-d at Mount Sinai to give the Torah to the Jewish people, the numerous miracles He performs and the prophecies of his prophets are all clear evidence of a mystical tradition. Judaism always combined mysticism and rationalism, and there is no need to create a non-existent dichotomy between them.

Even the Talmud, Judaism's most comprehensive source of law and practice, is replete with mystical teachings. It is not uncommon for the rabbis of the Talmud to smoothly make the transition in their discussions from a strictly legal matter to a spiritual, mystical one.

Restrictions on Kabbalah

The Hebrew word Kabbalah means, "received." Unlike other areas of knowledge, which one can study by oneself, Kabbalah must be received from an authority, who in turn, must have received it from another authority, going back to Moses, who received it from G-d. Some

Kabbalists are known to have received their knowledge from Elijah the prophet, who received it from Moses. A student of other disciplines, such as math, history or physics, can take a book out of the library and learn the subject without the aid of a tutor. To a lesser degree, this can also be accomplished with the classic texts of Judaism, such as the Bible, Talmud and Midrash. Kabbalah, however, is unique. It must be received from a higher source; otherwise, it can be easily corrupted and rendered harmful.

Mysticism is, in and of itself, innocuous. However, the more advanced mystical pursuits can indeed be dangerous. Mysticism, when handled without care, has been implicated in many a Jewish tragedy. According to Jewish sources some of the false Messiahs used Kabbalistic knowledge to perform miracles that enabled them to mislead people and lure them into idolatry.

Shabbatai Tzvi, the notorious false Messiah of the 17th century, whose escapades led to unprecedented disillusionment among the Jewish people, was known to have dabbled in Kabbalah. Jacob Frank, another false Messiah,

was a student of Kabbalah. (Incidentally, most of the legitimate Kabbalists were stridently opposed to these charlatans.)

The study of Jewish mysticism was considered so dangerous, that hundreds of years ago the rabbis decided that certain Kabbalistic texts should not be studied before the age of 30 and other not even before 40. These restrictions were based on Talmudic dictums. The Talmud (Chagigah 11b-16a) speaks of restrictions on teaching the "Act of Creation" and the "Act of the Chariot," interpreted by rabbinical commentators as references to Kabbalah.

The Imagery of Kabbalah

There are several reasons why the teachings of Kabbalah have been responsible for such negative consequences.

First of all, Kabbalah, which has been called the "anatomy" of G-d, deals with G-d's attributes and forces, through which the spiritual realms are generated. Inasmuch as there are no real words in our lexicon to describe G-dly forces (since language was created for human concepts and events), Kabbalah employs physical

metaphors to describe the Divine forces and G-dly attributes. These metaphors were never meant to be interpreted literally. This is particularly true with regard to those passages that employ sexual imagery.

The study of Kabbalah can be harmful to those who take its figurative terminology literally. To do so is to attribute physical properties to G-d, which is tantamount to idolatry and blasphemy. This can best be compared to a person who takes a coded message and interprets it literally. Not only is the literal translation of the coded message incorrect, but others are prevented from gaining access to the secret meaning of the message. In a time of war this could lead to total disaster. Therefore many great Jewish leaders - particularly those steeped in the mystical tradition, such as the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement - cautioned against the study of Kabbalah until the student was ready for it.

Lower is Higher and the Discovery of Fossils

One of the most famous and grave distortions of Kabbalah occurred when the followers of

Shabbatai Tzvi, and later the Frankists, misapplied the Kabbalistic notion of "The higher something is, the lower it falls." They reasoned that since evil is the very lowest form of behavior, it must come from the highest and most sublime spiritual domains. They believed, therefore, that by performing evil actions - the more immoral, the better - they could reach the greatest spiritual heights.

Under the sway of this perverse logic, these individuals engaged in the most immoral behavior. Later on we will learn how "The higher something is, the lower it falls" is actually a valid concept in the proper context. Taken out of context, however, and detached from the foundations of Torah and its commandments, this notion is sheer heresy and dangerous.

A modern-day illustration of how a Kabbalistic concept came to be misconstrued, even by learned rabbis, is the erroneous, literal interpretation of the statement found in the Midrash: G-d created worlds and then destroyed them until He created our world which pleased Him.

Some have taken this passage literally - to mean that there were previous physical worlds - to reconcile the discovery of fossils seemingly millions of years old with the Jewish tradition concerning creation. This sounds plausible at first, but in actuality the Kabbalists have always understood that this passage is speaking of spiritual worlds. These spiritual worlds were constantly being created and destroyed as a prelude to our world.

Acquisition of Powers

Another danger associated with Kabbalah is the attempt by some to use it as a way of acquiring supernatural powers. Although Kabbalah can provide these powers, the greatest Kabbalists would always warn against using Kabbalah in this manner. Only in the most dire of situations - such as when the Jewish community was being assaulted by frequent pogroms -- did some Kabbalists permit the use of the mystical powers associated with Kabbalah as a defense, and even then they dreaded the possible negative "side effects."

One of these exceptions is the case of the Golem. According to Jewish tradition, Rabbi Yehudah Lowe - known as the Maharal of Prague - one of the greatest Jewish thinkers and legal authorities of the 16th century, fashioned a creature out of clay and, using Kabbalistic powers, infused it with a soul to protect the Jewish Ghetto from the infamous charge of the blood libel.

The Maharal's Golem - which possessed incredible strength, an uncanny ability to sense impending danger and the ability to scare off any potential attacker, but lacked the power of speech - was not the first in Jewish tradition. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 65b) recorded the creation close to 2,000 years ago of human and animal golems by some of the Talmudic sages using the ancient Kabbalistic work, Sefer Yetzirah, the authorship of which is attributed to the Patriarch Abraham. This work, when mastered, imparts the secret of creation - the ability to replicate G-d's creation.

Belief in the golem was so strong that we find it asked in legal rabbinical literature (Responsa, Chacham Tzvi, She'ilat Ya'avetz) whether a golem can be counted in a quorum for praying!

(The answer is no. The golem is not even considered a human being because its creator is allowed to reverse the process that gave it life.)

Although he gave himself license to create the Golem in a time of emergency, the Maharal enjoined all those who were involved in its creation to not divulge anything about it during the Maharal's lifetime. This is like a person employed by the CIA who has access to highly classified information. If he is a person with integrity he would never divulge this secret information. Only in a rare case, perhaps when an agent's life is in danger, and sharing the classified information with the right people might save his life, would the employee be justified in divulging some of this information - and even then, only as little as possible.

Don't Leave Go!

Most, if not all, of the world's mystical traditions accentuate the need for the soul to climb to greater spiritual heights. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the soul, feeling imprisoned in the body, seeks to "break out" of its confinement. This can lead to disinterest in

physical things, a life spent as a hermit divorced from the rest of society. The greater danger, as the soul endeavors to break free, is that the soul might severe its ties with the body all together. Ultimately, this means death: the soul actually leaves the body and cannot return.

To be sure, many cultures considered that outcome to be perfectly fine. In fact, they engaged in mystical meditation for that express purpose - to escape the physical world. In some instances, the goal was death. In most cases, they were satisfied with "soul travel," a temporary flight of the soul from the body. At the very least the mystic wanted to be divorced from material existence.

The desire to be totally divorced from the world is also found, sporadically, in Judaism. Nadav and Avihu, the eldest two sons of Moses' brother Aaron, the High Priest, died when they brought an unauthorized offering to G-d on the day that the Tabernacle was dedicated. The Torah reports that a "fire from G-d descended and consumed them."

According to Or HaChaim, a Bible commentator and mystic, death was not a punishment for their sin; it was the very objective of their sin.

They were so consumed with a passion to connect to G-d that their souls just "soared" to the heavens and did not return. They were truly "consumed" in their own fire.

The Zohar, the central work in the literature of Kabbalah, records other examples when mystical practices so excited the practitioners that their souls simply left their bodies.

Similarly in the last 200 years of the Chassidic movement there are many stories told of Chassidic masters whose lives were almost lost because of their ecstatic outpouring of love for G-d.

Despite these occasional references, most Jewish mystical experiences did not result in death or any other mishap. Separation from the physical world is at variance with the basics of Judaism. As will be explained later, Judaism is based on the belief that it is our task to make the world in which we live a "dwelling place for G-d," by generating spirituality within the confines of the physical world.

The Heartbeat of Judaism

One is entitled to raise the obvious question: If wanting to leave the body is so contrary to the very tenets and objectives of Judaism, why do we find references to it scattered throughout the Torah? To answer this question, we need to look at life from the perspective of those Jewish mystics who were willing to give up life for the mystical experience.

Kabbalah conceives of every moment in time as a composite of two opposites - a movement away from and a movement back toward. Like blood, which is pumped in a constant flow away from the heart and back to it, and oxygen, which keeps circulating out and then back into the lungs, the soul lives in a world of incessant advance and retreat, or in the terminology of Kabbalah, *Ratzo v'Shov*.

During times such as prayer, the advance mechanism of our soul functions best. We feel then a natural desire to get closer to G-d, to divest ourselves of our materialistic crust. The Ba'al Shem Tov, the originator of Chassidic thought, used to say "farewell" to his wife before he would commence his daily prayers. He did not know whether he would return or not.

When we give tzedakah (charity) or do any other divinely ordained act, we reverse the process - from advance to retreat - by seeking to engage G-d and the soul in the physical world. To be able to "bring" G-d into the material world one must, however, first get closer to Him (advance) by becoming more G-dly and thereby having the capacity to "draw" that G-dly energy into the material world (retreat).

The natural, G-dly rhythm to which our souls are attuned demands that we both advance and retreat. We must remember, though, that the ultimate goal is retreat. Advancing toward G-d may be an expression of our desire, but retreating to the world is G-d's desire.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman, one of the great Chassidic masters, was imprisoned by the Russians authorities after his enemies, who opposed his efforts to disseminate the mystical teachings of Judaism, promulgated a slander that he sought to overthrow the Czar.

During his interrogation it became clear to the officials that R' Schneur Zalman was no ordinary person. One of the government officials, (the deputy culture minister) a

theologian versed in Hebrew texts, came to R' Schneur Zalman with a Bible question: When Adam and Eve sinned they were ashamed and they hid. G-d then called out to Adam saying, "Where are you?" "Doesn't G-d know where everybody is?" asked the official. "Why did He have to ask Adam where he was?"

R' Schneur Zalman replied by referring to the answer of the Bible commentator Rashi that G-d asked Adam where he was as a way to engage him in conversation, so as not to startle him.

The prison official was not satisfied: "I know Rashi's answer, but I'd like to hear your answer."

R' Schneur Zalman asked the man if he believed that the Torah is eternal and speaks to every person in all times. The official answered in the affirmative. R' Schneur Zalman replied that in every time, to every person, G-d comes with a question: "Where are you?" A person can be 52 years old (the age of the Russian official) and yet not have accomplished what G-d placed him in the world for. G-d says to him: "Where are you?" Needless to say, the prison official was pleased with R' Schneur Zalman's explanation.

At a later time, R' Schneur Zalman remarked that this incident actually saved his life. He knew that his incarceration was his sacrifice for the deepest teachings of Torah. However, in prison he was visited from the other world by his mentor, Rabbi Dovber, the Maggid of Mezeritch, and the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement. After this experience his soul was so aflame with passion for G-d and His Torah that he was at the point of expiring. His soul, in an extreme state of advance, had about reached its capacity to stay within his body.

At precisely that moment R' Schneur Zalman heard, via the official, the question "Where are you?' And when he told the official that G-d asks every person where he is in fulfilling the purpose for which he was sent to this world, R' Schneur Zalman realized that what he had told the official pertained to him in his present crisis. G-d sent him to spread the teachings of mysticism and to make the world a G-dly world - not to expire in his soul's desire for absolute G-dly pleasure.

This incident saved not only R' Schneur Zalman's life, but the life of the fledgling

Chassidic movement which had dedicated itself to spreading the teachings of mysticism to the entire world.

It is instructive that the incident that saved Jewish mysticism was one in which the mystic was about to experience the ultimate mystical event of his soul soaring to its heavenly Maker. Those words - "Where are you?" - are the defining words of Jewish mysticism: Don't run away from your responsibilities to engage in what is pleasurable to you, even if it is the pleasure of the soul.

Crossing the Line

One final danger in the pursuit of mystical goals is the danger of being so overwhelmed by mystery and ecstasy that it leads to involvement with the mystical traditions of non-Jewish religions. Indeed, the idol worship that Jews have succumbed to, as described in the Bible and Talmud, was enticing because it was intertwined with a mystical experience. The pursuit of a mystical experience with improper motives can lead the novice to other religions and ultimately total rejection of the one G-d.

In recent years we've seen an explosion of books that deal with Kabbalah. Tragically, however, most of them combine snippets of Kabbalah with New Age philosophy, Eastern religion and pagan mysticism to make Kabbalah more appealing to those who have become captivated with New Age philosophies. It is very easy to cross the fine line between monotheistic mysticism (Kabbalah taught properly) and idolatrous mysticism.

The Orchard

The Talmud (Chagigah 14b) tells the ultimate story about these dangers. Four great sages of Israel - Ben Azai, Ben Zoma, Acher (Elisha Ben Avuya) and Rabbi Akiva - entered The Orchard and came out affected in different ways: Ben Zoma became mentally deranged; Ben Azai died; Rabbi Elisha became a heretic; and only Rabbi Akiva "entered in peace and left in peace." What kind of orchard was this that led to such disastrous consequences?

Rashi and other commentators explain that this was not a physical orchard, but an excursion into the heavenly spheres and secret knowledge.

Only Rabbi Akiva, who had the right philosophy of life and who therefore entered in peace, was fortunate to leave in peace. The others had no restraints, and the power of their spiritual quest harmed them. "Peace" is the synthesis of two disparate entities. Rabbi Akiva realized that the ultimate goal is to bring together the physical and the spiritual and to avoid their annulment. He therefore knew how to regulate his spiritual excursion and return unscathed.

Interestingly we can find the five dangers we have been discussing in the side effects suffered by the rabbis who entered The Orchard.

The first danger we discussed is misinterpreting and distorting ideas by taking metaphors literally.

The second danger is distorting and misapplying the concepts of Kabbalah, as did the Frankists, who came to believe that evil is really good.

There is reason to believe that one of the first two factors, or both of them, were responsible for Acher's downfall. This premise is based on a careful analysis of the Talmudic narrative concerning Acher's reaction to his experience.

The third danger, using mystical powers incorrectly, and the fourth, seeking to escape from the world, may have caused the calamities of Ben Zoma, who became deranged, and Ben Azai, who died.

The fifth danger, making the leap from pure, monotheistic mystical experiences to pagan, polytheistic ones, describes Acher's apostasy.

We can now better appreciate why the Jewish sages put so many safeguards on the study of Kabbalah and warned against its abuses. But this leaves us with a new burning question (which we will get to soon): If mysticism is so dangerous, why are we discussing it?

CHAPTER THREE

THE UNIQUENESS OF JEWISH MYSTICISM

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Borrowed Magic

Having discussed the dangers associated with mysticism, we will be able to appreciate the qualities unique to Jewish mysticism which make it a less dangerous mystical system. But to better appreciate the differences between Jewish mysticism and mysticism in other traditions, we should first discuss their common thread.

According to the Zohar, the principle work of Kabbalah, Eastern religions borrowed their mystical tradition from Jewish sources. Prior to Abraham's passing, the Torah relates how he "gave all that was his to [his son] Isaac. (Genesis 25:5)" Insofar as his other seven sons (Ishmael and another six sons whose names the Bible mentions in verse 2) were concerned, the Torah relates that Abraham "gave them gifts (ibid)."

The Jewish sages ask an obvious question about this passage: If Abraham had already given everything he owned to Isaac, what gifts were left to give to the remaining seven sons? The sages' answer (see Rashi's commentary) is that Abraham gave them occult powers.

The Bible also tells us that Abraham sent these sons "to the lands of the East." According to the Zohar, they migrated eastward, sharing their mystical powers with the Eastern peoples of the time. It is interesting to note that the Hindu word Brahman may have come from the name Abraham. The rabbis therefore understood that the non-Jewish forms of mysticism stem from a Jewish source. Any resemblance between the two systems can be attributed to their common origin.

One thing Jewish mysticism has in common with all mystical systems is the belief that there is more to existence than meets the eye.

Modern science has helped us realize that not all natural phenomena are accessible by the senses. We don't see electricity, radio waves, atoms or quarks, yet we know and believe that they exist.

Mysticism takes us a step further and asserts that there is a reality that transcends physical reality.

Another common thread running through the world's mystical traditions is the belief that there is a way for us to connect with that transcendent "otherness." All mystical systems assert that through meditation and other techniques one can bridge the gap between the physical and the spiritual. There may also be some specific beliefs that other mystical systems either borrowed from Judaism or realized through the efforts of their practitioners.

When people dedicate their lives to the pursuit of truth, there is no reason why they might not be able to discover on their own at least some of these truths.

[We have also been taught that Torah represents perfect Divine knowledge. All truths contained in all the other disciplines such as science and philosophy represent dimmed versions of the original light that derives from Torah. Only the Torah contains unadulterated truths and knowledge. Other disciplines, secular or religious, are, by definition, admixtures of

truths and fabrications, and most people are incapable of sorting them out.

Once the Torah was introduced into the world, any human being could "pick up" some of Torah's "vibrations" and could intuit ideas and truths that are Torah's exclusive domain.

Even foreign languages, we are told, have sparks of Hebrew, the Holy tongue that were scattered and distributed throughout the world and found their "resting place" in these languages.] -

Prerequisites for Jewish Mysticism

While there are many similarities between Jewish mysticism and other mystical traditions, there are far more differences. To ensure the integrity of any mystical system, three criteria must be met:

1) It must be transmitted in its pure, unadulterated form;

2) It cannot be allowed to fall under the influence of foreign belief systems;

3) It must be handed down from people of high moral character to people of high moral character.

All three of these criteria were violated in the transmission of the mystical tradition of the East which originated with the "gifts" Abraham gave the seven sons:

1) Abraham did not give the seven sons the essence of his mystical knowledge. What he imparted to them was only a glimmer of the mystical knowledge he possessed. Moreover, our sages refer to this knowledge as "impure." From the very outset, they had access only to an adulterated form of Abraham's mystical treasure.

2) When Abraham's sons migrated to the East, they intermingled with the indigenous populations, and their religious systems meshed. Most likely, much of the mystical knowledge that these populations received from the sons was further diluted through assimilation.

3) With the passage of time, the populations of the East altered the mystical tradition to suit their own preferences. And when their lifestyles became immoral, they further compromised the tradition.

The Jewish mystical system, on the other hand, has always been passed on in its whole form,

without exposure to alien traditions, from people of unassailable moral standing to others of the same ilk.

This last factor, entrusting Jewish mysticism exclusively to those whose behavior is beyond reproach, guaranteed not only that the knowledge would not be corrupted, but meant that Jewish mysticism would always go hand in hand with Jewish observance and Talmudic scholarship. Morality, knowledge of all aspects of the Torah and dedication to observance of all of the commandments, are all intrinsic components of the Jewish person's mystical development.

When we survey the names of the greatest mystics of the Jewish people we find a very telling phenomenon: The great mystics were practical people, realists. They were all steeped in Halacha (Jewish law), the most practical component of Torah. Indeed, many were considered to be among the greatest masters of Halacha. The 13th century sage Nachmanides, for example, was noted for his Kabbalistic knowledge and was simultaneously the undisputed Talmudic master of his time, as well as the leader of Spanish Jewry. The greatest

Halachic (Jewish legal) authority of the 16th century, Rabbi Yosef Karo, who authored what is still today the most authoritative code of Jewish law, was also a noted mystic. Most remarkable is his work Magid Meisharim which contains his dialogues with his angel-mentor.

A contemporary of Yosef Karo, the Ari, by far the greatest Kabbalist of his time and perhaps, in many respects, the greatest Kabbalist of all times, was also a noted Talmudic scholar. Yosef Karo sat at the feet of the Ari and drank thirstily his teachings of Kabbalah, as did many other great Halachic authorities of that period.

Since the days of the Ari, virtually every renowned Halachist has also been steeped in Kabbalah. At the core of this phenomenon is the fact that Judaism, and by extension Jewish mysticism, does not believe in escaping from the world.

Shunning the Body

Most mystical systems shun material existence for one of two reasons. In some religions everything physical, including the body, is considered evil, an obstacle to anything holy

and good. The ideal attainment in these religions is to deny the body, escape from the physical world and shun all worldly pleasures. In other religious systems the physical is viewed as having no real existence. Their notion is that there is no reality to this world. It is only a facade; the only reality is spirituality. Whereas the former group disdains the body because to them it is a formidable opponent, the latter group shuns the body because it is a non-existent entity, a mere illusion. In the final analysis, both philosophies reach the same conclusion and reject the physical world.

Jewish mysticism disagrees with both views concerning the body and the physical world. They are not viewed as being inherently evil. On the contrary, Jewish mysticism believes that despite the fact that the body and materiality might pose an obstacle to one's spirituality, the object is not to shun them but to refine them and harness them in the pursuit of our spiritual goals. Jewish mysticism also rejects the notion that the physical is non-existent. Although Jewish mysticism shares the belief that the true nature of all of existence - both spiritual and physical existence - is G-d's creative force, it does not accord more reality to the spiritual

than it does to the physical. Both are manifestations of G-d, Who expresses Himself in both ways: in the spiritual and in the physical. Jewish mysticism accepts the existence of both the body and the soul. One's mystical experiences are not considered to be authentic if they are not simultaneously coupled with observance of the Mitzvot. A mystic whose soul is constantly trying to escape the world is not getting any closer to G-d, because G-d wants us to relate to the physical world and change it.

... And the Spirit In Which It Was Given

Jewish mysticism, in its own words, is the soul of Torah. The Torah's body is its legal system. Just as there is no life when there is a body without a soul, there can be no true Jewish existence when the observance of the laws - the body of Judaism - is bereft of it soul - the mystical dimension of Judaism. Conversely, the life of the soul cannot express itself without a body. When the mystical aspects of Judaism are disconnected from the body of Judaism, they lose their focus and cannot be expressed. The mystical ideas remain in the realm of theory and are virtually wasted because they do not

translate into the world of physical reality. The following anecdote that illustrates the duality of Torah's mystical and legal components, the body and soul of Judaism.

A certain rabbi has a weakness for alcoholic beverages which he tries to keep from his congregants. Despite his efforts to conceal his problem, one astute member of the congregation, Mr. Schwartz, discovers the rabbi's penchant for booze and is intent on making the rabbi deal with his problem.

Before the High Holy Days, Mr. Schwartz brings a case of fruit liqueur as a gift to the rabbi and offers it to him with one stipulation. The rabbi must acknowledge the gift during one of his well-attended High Holiday sermons. The rabbi is in a quandary. Should he accept the much-desired gift, he would have to divulge his secret to the congregation. Should he not accept it, he would not be able to enjoy the wonderful liqueur.

Finally, after giving it some thought, the rabbi agrees to the terms laid down by Mr. Schwartz. "I'll accept the gift, and I will speak about it in my sermon."

Sure enough, the moment of truth arrives. The rabbi, whose sermon is about the need to be more charitable, mentions Mr. Schwartz's generous gift.

"And I'd like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the generosity of one of our members, Mr. Schwartz, for his exquisite gift of fruit ... and the spirit in which it was given ..." (I don't understand how this story illustrates the duality.)

In this humorous anecdote, the rabbi succeeds in misrepresenting the truth while not saying anything that was not true. The gift did have fruit and it did include the spirit, but the two entities were represented as distinct and disparate. Fruit is a tangible reality and "spirit" is a feeling and attitude. In reality, what the rabbi had received was one gift that was a mixture of the two fruit and spirits.

Jewish mysticism does not tolerate the separation of the mystical from the ordinary and the mundane from the spiritual. Both sides - mysticism and rationalism, spirituality and physicality, body and soul - must be together to enjoy the essence of the Jewish experience.

Keep it to Yourself

A salient difference between the Jewish mystic and other mystics is lack of self-indulgence. While the experiences of the mystic occupy so much of mystical literature, Jewish mystics hardly acknowledge having any. Humility always permeated the mindset of the Jewish scholar, whether he was studying Talmud or Kabbalah. The knowledge he acquired was not intended to be used for self-glorification; on the contrary, it justified his very existence.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, the famed sage who saved Jewry and Judaism in the era of the destruction of the Second Temple, put it succinctly: "If you studied much Torah, do not take credit for yourself, for this you were created" (Ethics of the Fathers 2:?).

The Jewish mystic did not meditate to express himself or to attain the most sublime spiritual pleasure; for him meditation was a pure exercise in self-refinement and a surrender of his ego to G-d.

For this reason Jewish mystical experiences - when they were punctuated with this spirit of humility and were focused properly - did not

present the same degree of danger as their non-Jewish parallels.

Becoming disconnected from reality is a minor concern when mysticism is placed within the Jewish framework. When the approach of the mystic is G-d-oriented rather than self-oriented, the likelihood of the soul leaving the body is greatly diminished.

When we are motivated by the desire to be more G-dly, we recognize that G-d can be found only when we conform to His will - when we live our physical lives in a G-dly manner. The self-indulgent mystic, however, does not desire to satisfy G-d's concerns, but only his own, though through the agency of spiritual experience.

When G-d wants him to return to the realities of this physical world, the Jewish mystic, despite the extremely blissful state he experiences as his soul yearns to leave the body to reunite with its Creator, decides to return to this world to do G-d's bidding.

Similarly, the last thing the Jewish mystic wants is to use his knowledge of mysticism to acquire supernatural powers. Only one who is driven by

selfish concerns can harbor these desires. Jewish mysticism is predicated on the premise that we are here to do G-d's will and that the pursuit of the mystical is not for self-indulgent, spiritual pleasure, but to make more complete our fulfillment of G-d's plan.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHY WAS IT KEPT SECRET?

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The Wine of Torah

The Torah often refers to Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah, as "sod," meaning the esoteric or secret dimension of Judaism. It is also referred to metaphorically as the "Wine of Torah." Besides the fact that wine, like mysticism, brings joy to the one who imbibes, wine is used as a metaphor for Jewish mysticism because it is associated with secrets, as in the Talmudic aphorism, "When wine enters, secrets come out" (Eiruvin 65a). Indeed, as the Talmud notes, the numerical value of the Hebrew word for wine - yayin - is 70, the same numerical value as the word for secret - sod. (In Hebrew every letter is also a number. When two words share a numerical value it indicates a shared theme.)

In many Kabbalistic writings the discipline of Kabbalah is known by the name CHAIN (grace),

an acronym for "chochma nistara" - "the esoteric wisdom."

It has also been noted that the English words "mystery" and "mystical" are very likely derivatives of the Hebrew/Aramaic word "mistorin" which, as its cognates "seter" and "hester," means secret or concealed.

Besides pointing out the mystical quality of Kabbalah, the wine metaphor also indicates the dangers of Jewish mysticism. Wine can enhance one's life, but it can also be the source of misfortune and destruction. According to the Talmud (Berachot 40a) the Tree of Knowledge that Adam and Eve partook of in committing the first sin was a grapevine.

Moreover, Midrash (Rabbah, Genesis 21:7) – states that had Adam waited another few hours, he would have been permitted to take the same grapes, make wine from them, and use the wine to make the Kiddush blessing to usher in the Sabbath. Adam's problem was his timing. He sinned by revealing G-d's mysteries - the "Tree of Knowledge" (a grapevine) - prematurely.

This error is repeated by Noah when he emerges in the new world after The Flood. The

first thing he does is plant a grapevine, and then he becomes intoxicated. As a result he is exposed and degraded, with dire consequences for one of his sons. As Adam before him, Noah miscalculated by divulging the secret of Torah - its wine - prematurely.

The metaphor of wine for Jewish mysticism suggests that it is a positive drink for some in moderation at the right time. But how do we determine when is the right time to imbibe? Since no one can be so presumptuous as to say that he is ready to study Kabbalah and will not be harmed, the rabbis have decreed that no one may study Kabbalah without proper authorization.

To become qualified to study Kabbalah, one must first spend years studying the legal part of Torah and demonstrate steadfast commitment to the practice of all of its precepts and an obsession with purity and holiness, among other conditions. Furthermore, this "license" involves being chosen by G-d, or by someone G-d had chosen, to learn, master and then teach these secrets to those who are deserving.

A time will come, however, when everybody will be able to imbibe, as we will discuss later. This

determination has to be made by G-d Himself, or by an objective initiate who was himself chosen by G-d.

Divine Intimacy and Spiritual Voyeurism

There is yet a deeper reason as to why the mystical teachings of Judaism were kept secret from the masses. The more cherished the object, the more we conceal it from the public eye, not just to prevent it from being sullied or stolen, but as a way of expressing the extraordinary value of the object.

Experiences can also be precious. Precious experiences, like precious objects, lose their value if they are not kept discreet. Marriage is a case in point. Marital intimacy is one of the most beautiful and holy expressions of G-dliness. It is, according to Kabbalah, the union of two half-souls that were separated during birth. Every marital union has the potential to unleash the deepest soul powers of husband and wife, giving expression on all levels of their being, from the most spiritual to the most physical. This type of experience, by definition, should be private.

Likewise, the teachings of Kabbalah and the experiences they engender are expressions of the most profoundly intimate connections that exist between G-d and man. The sages, cited by Rashi in his commentary on the Biblical book, Shir Hashirim, explain that the verse "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" in the Song of Songs is a reference to the secrets of Torah that will be revealed in the Messianic Age. That the Torah alludes to Jewish mysticism with the metaphor of kisses - in the most intimate and romantic sense of the word - illustrates the feelings of intimacy with G-d one experiences through the teachings of Kabbalah.

To wantonly and capriciously expose them to the masses is to strip them of their beauty, intimacy, exquisiteness and holiness.

And just as an outsider has no business intruding on the intimacy of two married people, those who are not initiates in the esoteric wisdom have no right to practice spiritual voyeurism. Voyeurism is a crime not only because it is an invasion of privacy, but also because it destroys the exquisiteness of a private experience.

The Cosmic Balance and Divine Deception

Kabbalah itself provides yet another explanation as to why its teachings had to remain concealed. When G-d created the world He introduced two modes of energy: one positive and holy; the other negative and unholy.

The purpose of creating a dual system is to enable us, the created beings, to make our own choices and use our own talents to tip the balance of the universe in favor of goodness and holiness. Whenever we perform a Mitzvah - especially if its performance was difficult and required much energy and willpower to overcome obstacles - we alter the composition of the world. When the created beings push the balance from bad to good, the forces of evil G-d created cannot complain that the balance was altered, because it was changed fairly and squarely, in accordance with the Divine "rules of engagement."

There are, however, other ways in which the balance of power can be shifted in favor of the forces of holiness and goodness. Whenever a new spiritual revelation is introduced into the world, the balance of power is dramatically altered.

The Revelation at Mount Sinai, for example, constituted the introduction of a major, unprecedented influence of Divinity into the world. And throughout history there have always been smaller but nonetheless powerful surges of spiritual energy into the world.

These explosions of divine energy, however, pose a problem: if these dual forces of good and evil were designed by their Creator to be equally balanced, how do we "get around" the system? Wouldn't the forces of evil "demand" that they too be given more power? And wouldn't the spontaneous spurt of good energy dictate that there be a concomitant introduction of evil?

To deal with this potential threat to any major spiritual change in the world, the Creator employs a system of "subterfuge." The new surge of spiritual energy is camouflaged and thereby "smuggled" into the world.

We find several examples of this "stealth" phenomenon in biblical history.

When Isaac wanted to bless his son Esau before his passing, Rebecca asked her son Jacob to disguise himself as if he were Esau. Jacob, the

progenitor of the Jewish people, received the most powerful blessings from his father Isaac by way of deception.

Many commentators have grappled to understand why such holy people would use such unholy means to obtain these blessings. Even if we try to justify Jacob's use of deception to get the blessings - for example, by explaining that Esau was guilty of deception because he failed to notify his father that he had sold his birthright and was not interested in Isaac's spiritual legacy - it is difficult to comprehend why G-d would allow the transferal of the blessings through such unorthodox means.

Kabbalah provides the answer. These blessings were not just the wishful thoughts of a loving parent expressed to his children before his death. If that were the case, why did Isaac choose to bless only Esau? Why would he not also bless Jacob?

The Jewish mystical tradition teaches us that these blessings were the channeling of some of the most powerful spiritual energies in Isaac's possession. It was Isaac's contention that these spiritual energies were needed to help refine the world. In Isaac's mind, Esau, the earthy hunter,

was the proper conduit through which these energies would reach the world. Jacob, he thought, was too "other-worldly." Isaac reasoned that had the blessings been given to Jacob, they would never reach the lowest levels of existence. Isaac did not fully appreciate that Esau, due to his coarseness, would not be able to internalize these energies. In the hands of Esau, instead of these spiritual blessings changing the world, they would be lost and gone to waste.

In truth, Jacob was better equipped to retain these blessings, internalize them and transmit them to the rest of the world.

However, if Jacob would have been endowed with such unusual spiritual powers in an open way, the forces of evil would have cried foul, and countervailing negative energies would have had to be introduced into the world to retain the balance between good and evil. To preclude this G-d orchestrated the introduction of these blessings into the world through deceptive means. The forces of evil never suspected that the ultimate positive energies would enter the world through the ultimate subterfuge.

Another example of the most powerful spiritual forces coming into the world through

camouflage is the soul of Moshiach, the Messiah. According to Jewish tradition, based on the Bible, Talmud and other classical Jewish writings, Moshiach is the person G-d has chosen to bring the world to its ultimate state of perfection, when evil will cease to exist. The forces of evil, of course, would never accept the entrance of a soul so powerful that they would be put out of business. So to introduce this soul to the world, say the sages, G-d used subterfuge.

The Messiah is a descendant of King David. Yet when one analyzes the genealogy of King David, one would hardly think that he would be chosen to be the progenitor of the most spiritually sublime Jewish leader. King David was a descendant of Ruth, the Moabite princess, who, in turn, was a descendant of Lot, Abraham's nephew, and therefore she was the progeny of the incestuous relations he had with his younger daughter, as told in the Book of Genesis.

Ruth's husband Boaz was a descendant of Judah - the son of Jacob - and Tamar. Tamar disguised herself as a harlot and seduced Judah, her

father-in-law. The offspring of their union was Peretz, the ancestor of Boaz.

The marriage of Ruth, a Moabite convert, to Boaz was also dubious. Some of the greatest rabbis of the time criticized this marriage and regarded it as an illegitimate union because of the Torah injunction against a Moabite entering the Jewish community through marriage. Boaz's defense was that the prohibition did not apply to a female Moabite. Ultimately, the legal authorities upheld this argument, but this did not prevent King David's critics, several generations later, from questioning David's legitimacy as a Jew.

To make things even worse, there is a tradition that David's mother was suspected of committing adultery and that King David was the product of that illicit union. When we add to this very questionable ancestral record King David's relationship with Batsheba, from whom Solomon - who carried on the Messianic lineage - was born, the plot thickens.

Why would such illustrious Jewish leaders, the progenitors of the Davidic dynasty leading to Moshiach, be the offspring of such unrefined unions? Certainly G-d could have found some

candidates with purer pedigrees to be the leaders of Israel. But because the ultimate fruit of these leaders - the soul of Moshiach - was destined to upset the balance of good and evil in the world, they had to come into the world through camouflage. No one would ever suspect that these special souls would be the products of such unsavory relationships, and so the forces of evil did not rail against their selection as leaders. They anticipated no major upheavals from such souls, so there was no reason for them to panic.

Just as Jacob's blessing and the soul of Moshiach had to be introduced into the world through stealth so that the forces of evil would not notice, the powerful teaching of Kabbalah required a secret entrance.

Kabbalah's secrecy was maintained not only by keeping it from the masses, but also by the way it was transmitted - by metaphorical imagery, often sexual. No one would suspect that the deepest mysteries of creation would be conveyed by way of erotic imagery. No wonder so many novices erred in their understanding of Kabbalah. But because it could be introduced this way into the world without much

resistance from the negative forces, it had the desired impact. Little by little, the light of Kabbalah would prepare the world for a time when it would become accessible to all.

A Mystery that Cannot be Mastered

Take a book and cover it. It is now invisible to the naked eye. Think a thought and don't tell it to anyone. In both situations something is hidden: the book or the thought. The difference is that you hid the book, while the thought is, by definition, a hidden entity. But even a thought can be revealed. There are certain ideas that are beyond explanation.

Kabbalah, unlike other abstruse and abstract levels of knowledge, is not hidden from us because we are too simple to comprehend its wisdom; rather, this knowledge cannot possibly be fathomed. There is a natural barrier between us and Kabbalah.

To the modern American mindset, this is hard to understand. How can there be knowledge that is beyond our ability to comprehend? Scientists and philosophers once believed that the human mind would ultimately conquer all.

They believed there was no secret of creation that would not eventually be uncovered. Their attitude was the longer we do research, the more we will know and fewer will be the mysteries that elude us.

Those were, however, 19th century scientists and philosophers, who thought that the human mind had no limits. Twentieth century science reversed that confidence and optimism. With the uncertainty principle of quantum physics, DNA research and other scientific breakthroughs, it became evident that there are aspects of nature that utterly transcend our comprehension. The more we discover, the more we realize that there is a dimension of existence that can never be accessed by the human mind that defies comprehension, quantification and categorization.

Kabbalah deals with precisely that realm of knowledge. It is secret not simply because we have good reason not to divulge its mysteries, but because it is by definition a discipline that cannot be fathomed and revealed.

The Bible tells us something seemingly superfluous about King Solomon: he was able to convey 3,000 parables. This information would

be impressive - if Solomon was known as the greatest storyteller rather than the wisest man of all. What the Bible is saying about King Solomon's wisdom is that it was so abstruse that it took 3,000 parables to bring any one of his ideas down to the level of the common man.

This means that when he conceived of an idea he had to garb it in a parable to make it intelligible. But even then it was still far beyond the reach of most people, necessitating a second parable to bring it down one more level. It took Solomon three thousands parables, or steps, to bring his wisdom down to the level of the common person. In other words, King Solomon's wisdom was 3,000 levels above the level of wisdom possessed by the average person.

Now even King Solomon's wisdom had its limits. According to the Torah, he could not fathom the reason for the purification process described in the Bible in which a person who had become impure through contact with a corpse is sprinkled with the ashes of a completely red heifer, a ritual that made the sprinkler impure. Moses, on the other hand, was

told by G-d its reason. This means that Moses' intellect transcended even Solomon's.

Now we would have expected Moses to understand all of G-d's ways. Yet the Talmud (Menachot) describes how this was not so. G-d showed Moses the future leaders of the Jewish people. When he saw Roman-era sage, Rabbi Akiva, Moses was greatly impressed. When G-d then showed him the tortuous way in which the Romans killed Rabbi Akiva by flaying his body with sharp iron combs, Moses protested: "Is this Torah and its reward?!" G-d responded by saying: "Be silent. This is what has arisen in My thoughts."

Even Moses, whose intelligence transcended Solomon's, which was 3,000 levels beyond that of an average person, hit a ceiling. There was something that he could not possibly comprehend because it utterly transcended logic. In a similar vein the teaching of Kabbalah is so sublime that it is beyond the level of human comprehension. No amount of parables can bring it down to us, because it is utterly outside the pale of human comprehension.

Intellectual Access Denied

This premise, that Kabbalah is beyond the realm of logic, begs an obvious question: if Kabbalah is so supra-rational, how did even the spiritual elite, who had access to it, comprehend this knowledge? How did the great Kabbalists write books about it and teach it to their disciples? Moreover, there is an attempt being made today to popularize Kabbalah. How can one popularize what is essentially beyond human comprehension?

The answer lies in a better understanding of the human psyche. We are accustomed to thinking that the human psyche consists of our intellect, emotions and five senses. Accordingly, if something cannot be accessed by any of these "instruments," it cannot be incorporated into our system.

In truth, there are other levels of consciousness that lie outside the parameters of our recognized senses and faculties. These levels are accessible only to the soul. One such matter is faith. When a person expresses belief in G-d, for example, it is not just an expression of "blind" faith - you believe because someone (your

parent or teacher) told you to believe - but a supra-rational expression of the soul.

Faith, in other words, is a faculty of the soul that is manifest within the person, most often when the intellect does not cloud it. Just as one's intellect can be clouded by emotion, so too can faith be clouded by intellect. Certain spiritual levels of awareness and knowledge cannot be penetrated by the normal range of faculties and senses. Only the soul has the means to draw from them. And to the extent that one's soul is dominant in one's life, the soul will be capable of apprehending this knowledge. A person who is "in touch" with his soul will obviously have an easier time connecting with his faith as well as other soul-experiences.

Just as being "in touch" with one's soul makes it easier to tap into faith and the other spheres beyond intellect, distancing oneself from the soul by fixating on the body's interests makes it more difficult to have faith. Ultimately, one must allow for the total domination of soul over body to prevent the body from posing a barrier to the soul's means of expression.

Limited Asceticism

This explains why, notwithstanding the aversion of Judaism and Jewish mysticism to withdrawing from the world and denying the body and physical existence, there was nevertheless, a school of thought within the community of Kabbalists that promoted ascetic practices. The aim of this school was to remove the impediments to the soul and its ability to reach into areas the human mind could not reach.

This self-denial was not, however, a repudiation of the crucial role the body plays in making the world into a G-dly place. It was just a means to gain supremacy over the base bodily obsessions, thereby allowing the soul to fully express itself to the point that the mystical knowledge would "enter" into and be "processed" within their conscious minds. (You need to either drop the quote marks and/or explain why it didn't really enter, etc.) Once that would occur, they were in a better position to refine the body and make the physical world holy.

Owing to the myriad of personalities, there were some Kabbalists whose main focus was revealing their souls' potential by withdrawing somewhat from the physical realm, while others

focused primarily on expressing in the physical realm the G-dly energy they accessed. They were not at odds with one another, rather their roles were complementary.

Besides having to overcome the obstructive nature of the body, the mystic had to be endowed with a soul attuned to mystical knowledge. Not all souls are created equal. Some souls are designed by their Creator to be receptive to Divinity; other souls are designed with a more limited capacity.

Kabbalistic knowledge was limited to an exclusive group, not as a matter of exclusion or discrimination against the less spiritual, but simply on the basis of ability. One who was not spiritual enough - either because of his inherent limitations or because of lack of personal refinement - would never be able to access Kabbalah. Not only would his study of Kabbalah be a waste of time, it would actually prove deleterious to his spiritual and physical well-being. Though thinking he was receiving revelations and the highest wisdom, in reality he would be having imaginary experiences and thinking distorted thoughts would not be fit to receive the wisdom of Kabbalah. One can read

all the writings of Kabbalah and have absolutely no real understanding of them, because his soul is not suited for accessing this information.

Granted, within the vast literature of Kabbalah there are certain bits and pieces of information that are clear and understandable, on some level. But the bulk of the material cannot possibly be fathomed even by the greatest intellect, unless his soul is on fire.

The modern-day "experts" of Kabbalah, even if they committed to memory all the Kabbalistic writings, are no closer to mastering Kabbalah than someone who never heard about it is. These "scholars," who employ logic and scholarly techniques to dissect the Zohar, for example, can be likened to someone who tries to cut water with a knife.

In light of Kabbalah's intrinsically concealed nature, two very urgent questions can and have been raised concerning the efforts by some of Judaism's greatest teachers to popularize the teachings of Kabbalah in the last few centuries: 1) Why would they jeopardize the well-being of the masses by revealing this sensitive knowledge? 2) How could they reveal something that is inherently beyond revelation?

Holy Receptors

Five main factors determine the nature of one's spiritual receptivity: the nature of one's G-dly soul; the nature of the intellectual soul; the nature of the animal soul; the nature of the body; and one's behavior.

Some people were born naturally holy. Either they possessed very lofty and sensitive souls, or their souls were very close to the surface of their consciousness.

What makes a soul close to our consciousness?

Chassidic thought reveals to us the existence of three distinct souls within each of us. The G-dly soul and the Animal soul are antithetical to each other; indeed, they speak a different language. What is intelligible to one is unintelligible to the other.

Yet, for us to express our G-dly nature within our physical existence which is driven by the Animal soul, we must have a referee. This referee is the third soul, known as the intellectual soul. Its function is to introduce the G-dly soul to its animal counterpart. In other words, it finds ways of using rational thought to convince the Animal soul that G-d and G-dly

experiences are positive and beneficial even to the Animal soul.

Now, the intellectual soul itself comes in different colors and hues. The more the intellectual soul is refined it allows the G-dly soul to connect to the animal soul and express itself.

In addition some people, whatever their soul's nature may happen to be like, are more spiritual than others because their animal souls and bodies were created in a manner such that they do not obstruct very much.

Another variable - the most important perhaps - is the way one lives. When one does not allow his baser instincts to take over, notwithstanding the spiritual status of his soul, he will be more receptive to spiritual influences.

Torah is G-dly wisdom cloaked in rational thought, and can therefore be understood by the average person. Even a totally non-spiritual person can understand the other dimensions of Torah.

Conversely, the mystical dimension of Torah is G-dly wisdom without a cloak of reason and is accessible only to the elite few, whose trans-

rational soul powers can access the divine dimension of Torah.

This leaves us with two questions:

First, how then could these esoteric and elusive teachings become accessible to the human mind?

Second, if there is a way to accomplish that feat, why was it not revealed from the outset?

We will tackle these two issues in the next few chapters.

CHAPTER FIVE
WHY WAS IT REVEALED

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Revealed and then Hidden

For over three thousand years, Kabbalah was entrusted to an elite group of saintly people, who zealously guarded these secrets. At Mount Sinai G-d revealed the Torah to all the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the experience they had was the experience of the most hidden and sublime aspects of G-d and His celestial messengers, known as angels. The commandments they heard were overshadowed by the mystical experience of Sinai.

Once the revelation of Sinai was over, the spiritual and mystical experience receded into the background and was concealed from their view. What emerged from the Sinai experience was a set of commandments, laws and regulations as to how one should live ones daily life. On the surface, these laws were devoid of spirituality. But, deep down, the Sinai

experience was still present. One had to search for it, but it was there.

There is a well-known Hebrew expression that encapsulates what happened at Sinai and what occurred after Sinai: It goes something like this:

At Sinai the hidden was revealed and the revealed was hidden; after Sinai the hidden was hidden and the revealed was revealed.

Why were the hidden energies revealed at Sinai, only to be concealed again?

Why is it being Revealed Now?

To answer this question let us first address the question we cited at the end of the last chapter: Why are we now attempting to popularize the mystical teachings of Judaism? After having established how inherently secretive the teachings of Kabbalah are, why would we try to reveal these teachings. Moreover, as was just mentioned, the process of Sinai revealed these teachings only for a brief period. Afterwards G-d Himself concealed this knowledge. Why would we try to override G-d's own action, by popularizing that which He wanted to be kept secret?

There are two approaches to this issue. Upon deeper reflection, we will discover that they are interrelated.

Conversion through Exile

The first approach is to analyze Jewish history and to understand the essence of Jewish existence.

The Jewish people were entrusted with the teachings of the Torah, intended not only for themselves. In addition to the observances of all the Mitzvot, which were given to the Jewish people exclusively, we were charged with the special mission of bringing the light of G-d to the world. By serving as an example of righteous and holy behavior and by imparting the knowledge of the Seven Noahide commandments, the very bedrock of a civilized society, the Jews would be the catalysts for the refinement of the world.

When Jerusalem was at its spiritual prime; when the Temple stood in all of its glory; the mere presence of a people who were so holy, in the land of Israel, had the intended effect. The world was looking to Jerusalem for moral

guidance and for a sense of awareness of the one G-d.

When the Jewish people themselves degenerated and were incapable of being a moral and spiritual force in the world, G-d had them driven into exile. On the surface it seemed that they were driven into exile as a punishment for their sins.

But, according to the mystical tradition, exile was not simply a punishment; it served a positive purpose as well.

Basing itself on the words of the Talmud, "The Jewish people were exiled in order to acquire converts," the teachings of Kabbalah raise the obvious question. In the course of close to two millennia that the Jewish people have been living among the nations of the world, there were a relatively small number of converts. Particularly during the last thousand years, it was a capital crime for Jews and non-Jews to be involved in a conversion to Judaism. Why would we have to suffer in exile if the only benefit is a paltry number of converts?

Furthermore, Judaism does not and never did believe in actively seeking converts to its

religion. To inspire a non-Jew to follow his Seven Noahide laws is one thing; it is an entirely different situation to convert them to Judaism.

Jewish mystical tradition teaches us that the Talmud was not referring to actual converts to Judaism. Our stay in exile among the nations enables us to acquire converts of an entirely different nature. Every time a Jew uses the resources that are available to him/her for a higher purpose, that object or resource has effectively been converted into something G-dly. The environment within which the mitzvah has been performed is a changed, or, converted, environment. In the argon of Kabbalah, this

Had we remained in Israel, there would have been parts of the world that we would not have been able to affect by our actions. Our existence in exile thus, while painful and punctuated with sorrow and travail, has had a positive effect on the world.

The Jewish belief is that when enough of our collective efforts will be performed the world will become a holy world and one that is so perfect that evil will cease to exist. This utopian

age, is what the Jewish people refer to as the Age of Moshiach.

Catch 22

There is a catch 22 situation here. Our purpose in exile is to change the world. However, being in exile has the opposite effect as well. Rather than Jews change their environment, the environment frequently changes the Jew. Whether it was persecution or assimilation, the Jewish people were decimated and crushed – physically, emotionally and spiritually – and were hardly able to survive, let alone "convert" the world.

Being in exile has made us extremely vulnerable to all the influences in the world. Everybody knows that people are most vulnerable when they are "on the way." Cults prey on their victims when they are in bus stations, etc. because the natural defenses that we have when we are anchored are unavailable to us when we are not in our own home. If this is true physically, it is also true on a spiritual plane. When we are outside of our true home which is Israel, we lack the security to be able to

withstand the pressures of our new environment.

Booster Shots

In order to survive and to be capable of discharging our role as the nation that makes the world holy, G-d was "compelled" to provide the Jewish people with extra measures of Divine inspiration and assistance, to be able to endure the hardships of exile. This assistance can come in the form of a very great charismatic Jewish leader, the publication of a major Jewish work or some form of Divine intervention.

As the exile continues and the Messianic Age of utopia appears to the average Jew as something far into the future, the exile becomes more difficult to endure. When this is compounded with devastating blows to the very lives and limbs of Jews, the situation becomes more desperate. When false hopes are dashed and disillusionment sets in, the situation assumes a crises mode and appears virtually helpless. At a time like that, G-d has no choice but to provide the world with a medicine that is so potent that

it will get the Jewish people out of their pitiful plight.

This scenario actually happened during the seventeenth century. After the pogroms of 1648 and 1649' led by the Cossack leader Chmelnicki that decimated virtually every Jewish community in Poland and Russia, the Jews were left devastated and demoralized. They had experienced an unprecedented attack on their communities. Perhaps, with the destruction of the Holy Temple previously and the future Holocaust as exceptions, Jews never experienced as concentrated an attack on their existence as during those pogroms.

If this was not enough, the economic conditions that ensued for the survivors were unbearable. The Jewish communities could not cope with the abundant number of destitute widows and orphans.

To aggravate the situation, the Jews experienced what can be considered perhaps their greatest disillusionment. Shabbatai Tzvi, the false Messiah, who flouted Jewish teachings, and who was therefore, by definition, not worthy and suited to be the Messiah, proclaimed himself to be precisely that – the long awaited Moshiach,

who was to save them and bring about the state of Utopia.

Because of the lack of proper communications that we have today and the distorted images of him that were popularized, many Jews, including leading rabbis initially accepted him as the Moshiach. Only after he converted to Islam at the behest of the Sultan of Turkey who threatened to behead him if he would not convert, did the overwhelming majority of Jews realize that he was an imposter. But the damage was already done.

The dejection and mass depression that overtook the Jewish masses was indescribable. The Frankist "reincarnation" of Shabbatai Tzvi was a new misfortune with an old flavor. It too wreaked havoc on the Jewish community.

If they could have found some solace in their collective victim status and their unity, alas, even that remedy was denied them. The Jewish community was split into two classes. The more fortunate of them who were able to afford a proper Jewish education became the spiritual elite, who looked condescendingly at their less fortunate brethren who were functionally

illiterate and materially and intellectually impoverished.

The simple Jew – who was then in the majority – was taunted and berated for his ignorance. To make things even worse, the itinerant Maggidim as they were called, would deliver fire and brimstone sermons in which they would threaten these poor Jews with all sorts of punishment in this and the next world.

In short, the Jewish people were at their lowest point, materially, emotionally, morally and spiritually. In the words of the Chassidic masters the world then experienced a state of "spiritual unconsciousness." There was a dire need for G-d to intervene with a very powerful surge of spiritual energy that would rejuvenate the sagging if not hopeless spirit of the Jewish world.

This new surge of Divine energy took the form of a leader of unprecedented stature, imbued with boundless love and concern for all. This leader was also someone who infused life and soul into the Jewish community by revealing the soul and life of Judaism, -- the teachings of Kabbalah.

This man was Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement.

Whispering their Hebrew Name Israel

According to a Chassidic tradition, the Ba'al Shem Tov possessed a unique soul that was best suited to reawaken the Jewish people and prevent them for falling into an "irreversible coma" that could have followed had he not come onto the scene.

In Kabbalah we are taught that when a person faints and the conventional methods of reviving the individual have failed, one should whisper the fainted person's Hebrew name into their ear. In some desperate situations this can help awaken the fainted individual. The reason this method works is based on a principle of Kabbalah that our Hebrew name is actually a spiritual conduit to our soul's connection to our bodies. When our soul's connection to our body is tenuous, the last resort is to thus mention our Hebrew name, which has the capacity to elicit our souls' energy back into the body.

Accordingly, when the Jewish nation was at a point of spiritual unconsciousness and in a dead faint, there was a need to "whisper" their collective name – Israel. Hence, the soul of Rabbi **Israel** Ba'al Shem Tov was introduced to the world to awaken it from its stupor.

A Three Pronged Strategy

The Ba'al Shem Tov's appeal was universal. His message was intended for two audiences primarily: The simple demoralized masses and the scholarly elite. And while they required two distinct approaches, both approaches emanated from the same well of Jewish mystical thought and energy.

For the masses, the Ba'al Shem Tov cloaked the mystical ideas in stories, parables and simple homilies. Embedded in them, however, were profound and inspirational that one could detect, intuitively, that they emanated from the soul.

For the scholarly elite, the Ba'al Shem Tov's message was that their arrogant use of Torah knowledge was not getting them closer to G-d. By teaching them the secrets of Judaism, its

soul, he sought to bring life into their sterile brand of intellectual Judaism. His message of G-dly energy challenged them to throw away their egotistical obsession with their own intellectual achievements.

For the born leaders of the Jewish people, the Ba'al Shem Tov revealed some of the most profound mystical teachings of Judaism, enabling them to spread throughout the Jewish world and bring G-dly light to the masses.

Utilizing this three pronged approach – to the masses, the elite and the genuine leaders – the Ba'al Shem Tov started a movement that revolutionized Jewish life. Its primary force was the mystical and spiritual dimension of his teachings.

Emergency Measures

In conclusion, the answer to the question as to why the teachings of Kabbalah were being revealed, was that the Jewish people were dangerously close to spiritual death, and the only emergency measure that could revive them was a new surge of Divine energy, the teachings of mysticism.

There is a beautiful story that illustrates this point.

The great Chassidic master, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (founder of the Chabad Chassidic movement) was once taking a stroll with Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz, a colleague of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's mentor, Rabbi Dovber of Mezeritch, the leader of the Chassidic movement.

Rabbi Pinchas was not happy with the direction the Chassidic movement took under the leadership of Rabbi Dovber He felt that too much of the mystical knowledge was being revealed by Rabbi Dovber.

As they were walking, they noticed a torn page of writing floating in the air and finally resting in the mud. When Rabbi Pinchas bent down to pick up the page he realized that it was a student's rendition of Rabbi Dovber's discourse on some esoteric aspect of Torah. Rabbi Pinchas was incensed. Wasn't this proof that Rabbi Dovber had gone too far. Now, as a result of his liberal approach to popularizing Kabbalah, the holiest teachings were literally floating in the air and landing in the mud!

Rabbi Schneur Zalman noticed Rabbi Pinchas's reaction and was alarmed. He knew that a man of the spiritual caliber of Rabbi Pinchas had to be reckoned with. Rabbi Schneur Zalman was petrified that Rabbi Pinchas' anger might actually cause irreparable harm to the object of his anger – Rabbi Dovber. Rabbi Schneur Zalman had to find a way to assuage the anger of Rabbi Pinchas. He did so by telling him the following parable.

Saving the Prince

There once lived a king whose greatest love was his only son, the crown prince. One day his beloved son took ill. From day to day his situation deteriorated. The best physicians were summoned to his bedside, but all their efforts were to no avail. The prince did not respond to any of their medications and he drifted into a coma. All the country's greatest doctors gave up.

Only one doctor approached the king with great trepidation and informed him that there is one remedy left that was not tried.

"Anything, the king cried. I'll try anything, no matter how expensive. Do anything, but save my son!" the king ordered.

"Your majesty, the only remedy known to me is in your crown. I must remove the crown jewel, the most exquisite jewel in the world, from your crown. Then I'll have to grind it and dilute the powder with water. If the prince will drink even one drop, there is a good chance that he will be saved. His condition being as serious as it is, most of the powder will probable spill out and it is likely that only a few drops will make it into his mouth. But, even those few drops could save his life. Your majesty, should I proceed?"

The king responded, unhesitatingly, "Yes, certainly. Take my crown, remove the most precious jewel in the world which will destroy the crown and grind it and feed it to my son. If this is the only way to save him, I'm willing to squander anything, even my most precious and cherished possession."

The happy ending to this story is that the crown prince did ingest a few droplets of this incredible potion and came out of his coma and survived, to the delight of all, especially the king.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman did not have to elaborate. The message was clear:

G-d is the king and we are the crown princes. We have become so spiritually ill that all the remedies that have been tried have failed to awaken us from our comatose position. In order to save the Jewish people, only one remedy was left. G-d would have to take His most treasured possession – His crown jewel – the hidden teachings of Torah and "grind" them and dilute them. Eventually, a few drops will enter the minds and hearts of the Jewish people and that will save them. In the process, however, much if not most of this knowledge will be squandered, wasted and end up in the wrong places, but as long as some of it will end up restoring the health Jewish people. It was well worth the sacrifice.

Rabbi Pinchas was mollified. Indeed, Rabbi Dovber subsequently thanked Rabbi Schneur Zalman for having saved his life.

While our ancestors were not in need of these teachings for their spiritual health, our generation cannot survive without it. With the advent of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Jewish people were given a dose of a very potent medicine.

With the passage of time, the need for this potion has not decreased. With the onset of the modern age, the so-called "Enlightenment" movement and with the winds of secularism, materialism and assimilation blowing ever so strong, it became even more imperative that these mystical teachings revealed by the Ba'al Shem Tov, be disseminated to the world.

In our post-Holocaust generation, the need for added spirituality and mysticism is even more pronounced. Never before have the Jewish people been dealt a paradoxical double blow. Our century has experienced what was arguably the greatest mass extermination of a people in history – the Holocaust. In addition, the country where the majority of the world's Jewish population resided – after suffering through decades of pogroms – were cruelly severed from their people and their faith by the Communist regime of the former USSR

Simultaneous with these physical catastrophes, the Jewish community has in the last half-century experienced the largest "dropping out" of its members. The rate of assimilation and intermarriage is at an all-time high, while the level of Jewish education is at an all-time low. If

the teachings of mysticism were necessitated two hundred years ago by the pitiful state of Jewish affairs then, how much more so, does our generation need more and more of an infusion of spirituality.

In conclusion, the changed attitude towards the promulgation of mysticism in modern times is due to the change in circumstances. The Jewish community and the world cannot survive without the added dimension of G-dly energy supplied by the mystical teachings of Judaism.

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In the next chapter, we will explain – G-d willing – how the teachings of mysticism in modern times was necessitated by a positive consideration as well.

CHAPTER SIX
PREPARING US FOR THE FUTURE

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Another Puzzle

We have discussed so far how the dire situation of the Jewish people necessitated the dissemination of Kabbalah, despite the reservations expressed in the past about doing so.

Were this to be the sole justification for the popularization of Kabbalah in the current era, it would leave us with yet another puzzle.

As was noted at the beginning of the last chapter, the mystical teachings of Judaism were actually first transmitted at Mount Sinai. Moreover, at Sinai the mystical experience dominated. The mystical experience was so powerful that it and overshadowed their grasp of the Ten Commandments with all of their detailed nuances. Only after Sinai, did the mystical experience recede into the background and the emphasis on the Torah's practical

directives emerged. Afterwards, only the spiritual elite were entrusted with this delicate knowledge.

Based on the above, one is entitled to ask, why did G-d have to make the revelation of the mystical teachings of Torah the dominant aspect of His communication at Sinai? If the objective of Sinai was to instruct us how to live our lives and to serve as a "light unto the nations" as to how they should live their lives, why was it necessary to reveal the teachings of mysticism at all?

When and if the need would arise to reveal these teachings to shore up the sagging spirits of the Jewish people, G-d could have revealed this knowledge to the select few, who, in turn, would reveal it to the masses at the right time. Why did this revelation have to reach everyone at Sinai, only to be withdrawn and kept secret for most until recent times?

Integral Part of Torah; Not just a Remedy

We are thus compelled to conclude that the teachings of Kabbalah are an integral part of Torah. Furthermore, these teachings are more

than just an important part of Torah knowledge; they form its very essence. There was therefore a need for G-d to have revealed these teachings at Sinai, to underscore their centrality to Jewish knowledge, even as He was planning to deny these esoteric teachings from the overwhelming majority of the masses. The concealment of mysticism was meant to be temporary. Ultimately, these teachings would have to become the property of all.

Preparation for the Future

Indeed, according to the Chassidic tradition, there is a totally different reason for the transformation of mysticism from the province of the spiritually elite, to the entire world. The teachings of mysticism were not only needed to lend us support, but to prepare us for the Messianic Age when the mystical knowledge will pervade the entire world.

Whereas our first explanation for the necessity of exposing the teachings of mysticism relates to the spiritual weaknesses of our age and the inferiority of our period relative to earlier times,

this explanation is based on the spiritual strength and the superiority of our age.

The Paradox

This paradox – that we are simultaneously spiritually inferior and superior to our ancestors – can be understood by way of introduction.

Let me first explain why the belief is that we are spiritually inferior to our ancestors. Many would take issue with this contention and find it rather offensive.

One way of measuring spirituality is to ask ourselves what is our "recollection" of the experience at Sinai. Judaism's – indeed, the world's – most pivotal event was the revelation at Sinai. At that point G-d informed the world what was the very purpose for its creation. That is when G-d made His "marriage" covenant with the Jewish people. It is axiomatic in Judaism that there will never be another such revelation at Sinai. In simple terms; the revelation of Sinai was and will remain the most important event!

So important was this event that our sages, based on Biblical sources, tell us that the souls all of the Jewish people – from the very

beginning of time to the very end of time – were present at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

So central was the Sinai experience to our Jewish existence is that if even one Jew would have been absent, our sages tell us, G-d would not have given us the Torah. According to another Midrashic account, the words of G-d at Sinai reverberated to the whole world, indicating that although not all people were present at the foot of Mount Sinai, the effects of Sinai extended to the entire human race.

The sounds of Sinai, our sages say further, did not have an echo. This miracle, Chassidic commentators explain, was not really a miracle. The voice of Sinai permeated all of existence to the point that the normal echo which is created by the sound "bouncing off" a physical surface did not occur, because the sound was absorbed by even the physical matter. Everybody and everything was affected by the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai in an unprecedented and unparalleled manner.

It is not far-fetched, then, to describe our generation's "spiritual lowliness" in terms of its recollection of or distance from Sinai.

Denying our very Legitimacy

To further illustrate what is meant by the spiritual degradation of our time. Let me refer to a troubling recent phenomenon. There are people who deny that the Holocaust happened! I cannot think of another issue that unites all Jews and all decent people. Everyone is outraged and utterly disgusted at the suggestion that the most brutal event in history simply didn't happen! Words are inadequate to express our emotions when we hear these so called "revisionists" deny the Holocaust.

Why are we so outraged? It is not simply the fact that we cannot tolerate people who distort the truth and who deny valid historical events. If these same people had denied most other historical events of recent vintage we would not experience the same feelings.

In very simple terms, the disgust that we feel is because the one who denies the Holocaust denies our legitimacy as a victim and by extension denies our legitimacy, period. When you victimize a person, you strip the person of their dignity, their humanity. You've killed them in one sense of the word. Our sages thus say

that embarrassing someone in public is like bloodshed, because you destroy their self-image.

There is, however, one thing left to the victim with which he or she can salvage his or her dignity. That is the ability to claim that he or she is a victim and demand that the perpetrators make amends for their crime.

When one denies that the crime took place, they deal the victim the ultimate blow to his or her dignity and humanity. It's like saying to the victim, "you don't exist." Nothing can be more painful than being de-legitimized.

Sinai: The Most Defining Moment of our History

If this is true concerning our status as victims, then it is certainly true about our very raison d'être. The experience at Sinai is what made us who we are. It is what gives our lives meaning. It is the most defining point of our existence. We are what we are because of Sinai. To deny Sinai is the most de-legitimizing experience.

The further away we get from the initial experience of Sinai, even chronologically, makes that experience more hazy. It is harder for us to

visualize something that happened to our ancestors over 3,000 years ago.

Added to the passage of time, are the many challenges that the Sinai experience received from the enemies of Israel, the skeptics within our community and from those whose lifestyles were at variance with the dictates of Sinai. The discomfort at realizing their errant ways induced them to either deny or suppress their knowledge of the Sinai experience. For the majority of people today, however, it is just a case of ignorance; benign neglect. Most people were simply not taught that this experience occurred and that it was the single most important experience in the world's history.

To the extent that our generation has distanced itself from Sinai, we are in an inferior spiritual position as compared to our forebears. This distance from Sinai, is the reason for the deterioration of Jewish values and the preservation of Jewish existence. Record number of Jews are assimilating and losing contact with Judaism and the Jewish people.

Because of this lowliness, our generation needs to be infused with additional measures of spirituality to awaken us and to refresh our

"memory" of Sinai. Even if we were not told of this event, our soul has the memory of it imprinted on it. The popularization of the "soul" of Judaism – Jewish Mysticism – in our time, has the capacity to awaken our own souls and to make its memories come alive.

Closer to the Mission's End

On the other hand, our present age, and **our** generation in particular, is unique in a positive sense as well. Though we are farther away from Sinai, we are nevertheless closer to the ultimate objective of Sinai.

What is the objective of Sinai? And how are we closer to the realization of this goal if, as stated above, we are chronologically and spiritually, farther away than ever before? How can we reconcile this apparent contradiction?

Let us first come to grips with what is perhaps the most important question of all: what are we here for? What is our purpose?

This reminds me of a story:

A certain Chasid came to his Rebbe, his spiritual mentor, Rabbi Schneur Zalman and

presented him with a long list of problems and needs he had. "Please, Rebbe, tell me what to do. How do I resolve my problems and take care of my many needs?"

Rabbi Schneur Zalman's reply to him was: "You've given me a long list of what you need, I do not see anything in your list that explains why **you** are needed."

The Chasid, upon hearing these pointed words fainted. He was revived and spent the next few months in deep introspection, reevaluating his whole life and what it was that was wanted of him. Needless to say, this reassessment resulted in helping him solve many of his other problems that arose due to false expectations and distorted priorities.

Why are **we** needed?

G-d's Master Plan

In more theological terms, the question can be phrased, "Why did G-d create this world? What are His expectations of us? What is **His** goal?

According to the Midrash, the purpose G-d had in mind when He created the world was to have

a "dwelling place" in this world. This means that G-d would create an untamed, unrefined and incomplete world; a world that does not naturally recognize its Creator and that there are responsibilities to Him, one's fellow man and the rest of the universe. This is a world that is not very hospitable to G-d. But, ultimately, this unfriendly world would become receptive to G-d's presence to the point that G-d would "feel" comfortable here.

By giving us the Torah at Mount Sinai, with all of its commandments, we gradually tame, refine, and complete the world and thereby "invite" G-d to reside here. Every Mitzvah we perform makes the world a little bit better. No matter how evil the world can be at a given time in its development, it does not detract from the cumulative good that was generated by generations of good deeds.

The Cumulative Effects of Mitzvot

In effect, the world is, by definition getting better every day. In a certain sense, the world is getting closer to Sinai every time we do something right. Despite the fact that there is

still much evil – and even as recently as a half-century ago, the world experienced unprecedented barbarism and savagery during the Holocaust – it did not cancel or neutralize the cumulative effects of millennia of good. Evil cannot and does not last forever as good does. When evil people repent or die or suffer, their evil is slowly but surely dissipated. Good can never be dissipated.

Accordingly, though we find ourselves at the farthest point from Sinai in the chronological as well as spiritual sense, we are actually closer to it, by virtue of all the good that we accumulate from our forebears.

Moreover, because we are so far away from the original experience of Sinai, every act of goodness and holiness that we perform has even greater value, for it is done without the aid and encouragement of the memory of our covenant at Sinai.

Why No Feeling?

There is only one problem that remains to be resolved. Why don't we feel the effects of this cumulative goodness? We should feel so good

and holy and the world should be impervious to any evil because it is so saturated in goodness?

The answer to this dilemma lies in the concept of free choice. To facilitate a balance between good and evil, G-d allowed for evil to be overt and blatant while good remains beneath the surface.

While we can easily experience delight and pleasure in the world of immorality and evil, it takes effort and sophistication to appreciate the rewards of goodness and morality.

Accordingly, evil is more potent because it is on the surface, but the forces of good are more powerful because, unlike evil that is "skin deep," the forces of holiness grow deep roots within the inner dimension of a person and the world.

So there is a duality to our situation. On the one hand, we are at the most remote point from the experience of Sinai, yet, on the other hand, we are as close to the realization of the objectives of Sinai as ever.

Going East or West?

A simple analogy will prove helpful in understanding the duality of our existence. A person is travelling eastward on a boat at a speed of 50 knots. This individual who has been standing on the eastern side of the ship has now decided to walk westward at a normal walking pace across the deck of the ship. If one were to be asked in what direction is this person travelling, one might come up with two – equally valid – answers. From the perspective of the person who is walking, he is going westward, but from the perspective of the ship and its destination, this person is going eastward.

While we appear to be regressing and distancing ourselves from Sinai, in truth we are simultaneously traveling inexorably in the direction of realizing the goals of Sinai, even as we feel that we are going in the opposite direction.

The Circle

Another analogy that applies here is a circle. When we are standing at a given point in a circle and then move in any direction. Every

step we take away from our original point is simultaneously a step in the direction of returning to that original point. In a linear scheme the further away one moves from the original point, the further away s/he is, but in a circular scheme it is the opposite.

Game of Charades

One significant dilemma still persists. While our actions have accumulated all the spirituality and goodness that have made the world an inviting place for G-d, the world does not experience it. For all of the holiness generated by our actions, we do not appreciate it. How long does this "game of charades" have to persist? When will the reality of our accomplishments parallel, the world's perceptions?

The answer lies in a better definition of mysticism. At Sinai, a Jew felt the presence of G-d and His unity; i.e., that G-d pervaded all of existence. This means that at Mount Sinai, a Jew, while recognizing the existence of the physical universe, was able to see through it and realize its true G-dly nature. When the Sinai experience was over and this feeling

evaporated, G-d's intention was that ultimately it would return.

In order to restore this awareness, the world had to first be transformed by way of the Mitzvot that instilled divinity into the physical actions and resources that go into a mitzvah. Every time a Jew puts on Tefillin, gave tzedakah, lit a Shabbat candle, etc., the physical action that caused the mitzvah was instilled with a G-dly energy and the resources with which the mitzvah was performed were likewise invigorated with spirituality.

As we get closer to realizing our goal and the world is filled with the accumulation of G-dly energy, the world is ready for the Messianic Age, at which time all for these accomplishments will be clearly seen by all.

This means that in the Messianic Age we will see the soul of all the Mitzvot that we did. G-d will be present in every aspect of our lives, just as it was at Sinai, with one major difference.

Whereas Sinai was a temporary and fleeting experience the sense of Sinai that we will recapture in the Messianic Age will be forever.

Sample of the Future

To prepare for this realization, G-d in His infinite kindness introduced the souls of people such as the Ba'al Shem Tov and others. Their G-dly nature enabled them to introduce this G-dly awareness through the G-dly teachings of mysticism, in a way that could be absorbed by all. In effect, when the Messianic Age arrives, we will not be "strangers" to this experience.

From this perspective the popularization of Kabbalah in our times was necessitated not by the depressed sate that we were in, but, on the contrary, because of the closeness we are to the Messianic Age, when these teachings will be totally open.

The Historic Letter

The Ba'al Shem Tov, in a letter to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon of Kitev, relates how on Rosh Hashanah of the year 5507 (251 years ago) is soul experienced "*Aliyat Haneshamah*-the Ascension of his soul" to the higher spiritual spheres. There he went from one "palace" to another until he reached the palace of Moshiach

(the Messiah) and asked him: "*Aimatai Ka'ati Mar*?-When is the Master going to come?" .

Moshiach's response to the Ba'al Shem Tov was: *Le'ke'she'yafutzu Ma'ayanatecha Chutzah*- When your wellsprings will be disseminated to the farthest reaches."

Based on this response the masters of the Chassidic movement, realized that the dissemination of the teachings of mysticism – as they were adapted by the Chassidic movement to make them accessible to the average person – was a necessary prerequisite to the coming of the Redemption through Moshiach and the onset of the Messianic Age.

Hence, the popularization of the teachings of mysticism is a positive development and is not only for the purpose of lending support to depressed spirits, but that it is to prepare us for the future when these teachings and the perceptions of spirituality that they engender will pervade the world.

To further comprehend the role of mysticism in our time, Chassidic thought refers us to a custom that originated with the great Kabbalist – the Ari – concerning the way we prepare for

the Shabbat. On Shabbat we are required to eat good and tasty foods, so that our enjoyment of the Shabbat is at its peak. When preparing these foods on Friday, there is a custom for people to taste the food.

According to Biblical calculations we are in the end of the sixth millenium since the creation of the world. Each millenium, the Kabbalists say, based on the Talmud, corresponds to the six days of creation, the six days of the week. Accordingly, the seventh millenium is the climax of creation. At that time we will reach the peak of spiritual pleasure, because all of the G-dly energies that we unleashed in the last six millennia by way of our performance of Mitzvot, will be realized. It will be like a person who looks back at the work s/he's achieved upon completion of a most monumental task. The delight is immense.

A Foretaste of the Feast of the Future

If the analogy of the Shabbat to the seventh millennium is valid, then we are at the "Friday, late afternoon" of creation. This is the time when the preparations for the Shabbat assume

a more frenetic and urgent pace. But, it is also the time when we are given a taste of the experiences that are to follow. Hence, samples of the mystical teachings that will be fully revealed are now being tasted by us, to savor the taste of these delectable delights and to whet our appetite for the onset of the Shabbat when the entire feast will be ours.

Pearls and Coals: Two Parables, Two Reasons

Two parables were given by Chassidic masters to describe the concept of Chassidic/mystical thought. As we will see the two parables parallel the two reasons that were given above as to why the mystical teachings have been popularized in recent times.

Pearls can be found in the depths of the ocean. Likewise coals, which provide light and warmth, can be found in the bowels of the earth. To obtain these objects, one must follow the instructions of their foreman, but that alone does not suffice. When digging beneath the earth's surface one must have a lifeline that connects him to the outside. The oxygen that the foreman breathes does not help the coal

miners who are beneath the surface. Similarly the diver who plumbs the depths of the ocean to find the peals must be provided with air from the surface of the earth.

The analogy of coals that provides light and heat, necessities of life, parallels the function of mysticism that enables us to cope with the darkness of exile. To buttress our sagging spirits as we travel through the period of exile and away from the Sinai experience, G-d enabled us to become "miners" who penetrate the surface of our souls and discover its Inner Light and life. The means to do this is through the soul of Torah – mysticism.

In the winter we cannot tolerate the cold and in order to survive it is imperative that we have coals or other sources of energy to keep us warm and to provide us with light. This parallels the first reason for the popularization of Kabbalah; to instill life and warmth into our Jewish life.

Pearls, by contrast are luxuries. One can live without them, but they do enhance our appearance. Now, despite the fact that pearls, or other jewelry, are a luxury, there are times when they become a necessity. When we are

preparing ourselves for a wedding, particularly if it is our own wedding, pearls and jewelry become a necessity.

This analogy to pearls parallels the second reason for the popularization of the mystical aspects of Judaism (the "pearls of Judaism"). While in the past, one might have viewed these teaching as adornments and luxuries, as we stand before the Messianic Age, which has been likened to a wedding, we must adorn ourselves and be dressed for the occasion.

Hence the need for the teachings of mysticism in our times to adequately prepare us for the future.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TRANSCENDENCE

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TRANSCENDENCE

How can We Access the Hidden Dimension?

Now that we've explained why it was imperative that the teachings of mysticism be disseminated to the entire world, we are left with perhaps the most difficult question to resolve.

How can these non-rational or supra-rational teachings be taught to the masses? If they are to be accessed by one's soul-powers that are beyond the faculty of logic and reason, as discussed at length in chapter four, how can a person who is not so spiritual and in touch with his or her soul, access these teachings intellectually? If they can be understood then they should not be regarded as mysticism. If they are not really mysticism, but a watered down version of it, how can these teachings affect us the way mysticism is capable of doing?

The answer lies in a better understanding of the parameters G-d created in this world and the way G-d Himself relates to them.

Putting Feelings in a Bottle

When we view our universe we observe certain basic rules. Take gravity, for example. When we drop something, here on Earth, it will fall to the ground. Yet if, suddenly, we would see the reverse occurring, it will startle us, but it does not defy logic, because we do know of instances where things do not fall to the ground, such as in outer space, or even down here, when we throw something into the air.

On the other hand, if one were to ask someone to take a feeling of hatred that one has to another and place it in a bottle and then seal it, so that the hatred is contained, it would be a totally ludicrous and illogical statement. There would be no need to tell someone that it is impossible to do that because the idea is so preposterous that it would call into question the sanity of the person who either suggested it or rejected it.

One cannot put feelings in a bottle, not because they are too big or too small, but because they belong to two totally different realms of existence.

Similarly, it would be most ludicrous to suggest taking an idea and putting it in a safe-deposit–vault at the bank for safe-keeping, unless it was intended in the figurative sense of the word, or that one was referring to the piece of paper upon which this idea was written.

One cannot, however, even conceive of the idea of taking an abstract concept or feeling and placing it within physical parameters. It is so utterly impossible that it would even be foolish to even have to negate it.

Is G-d Bound by Logic?

Jewish thought ponders whether G-d Himself is bound by the restrictions of logic. Biblical, Talmudic, philosophical and mystical literature – recognizes G-d's ability to alter the laws of nature. If G-d is the Creator of the universe and its very laws, He can certainly change these laws. There is however a question among classical Jewish philosophers as to whether G-d can defy logic.

For example: Can G-d put an elephant through the eye of a needle? Most people when confronted with this question will envision G-d

reduce the size of the elephant, so that it is small enough to squeeze through the eye of the needle. One can even imagine that it can occur without anyone noticing it, because G-d can perform this feat of expanding and then diminishing the size of the elephant so quickly that it is imperceptible to the human eye. Alternatively, G-d could expand the size of the eye of the needle and thereby allow the elephant to go through it.

The real question is can G-d allow the elephant to go through the eye of the needle without changing the size of the elephant or the size of the eye of the needle? It is not simply a question as to whether G-d can change the laws of nature, but whether He is bound by the rules of logic in the first place.

Proof form the Ark and the Burning Bush

From the Torah, Talmud and Midrash's description of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy Temple, a picture emerges of G-d actually doing precisely that which is illogical and contradictory.

The Torah provides us with very specific dimensions for the Ark. It was 2 1/2 cubits long by 1 1/2 cubits wide by 1 1/2 cubits high. It was made of three boxes. A golden box in which was contained a wooden box, in which was placed another golden box. The Ark was then placed in the Holy of Holies section of the Temple. The dimensions of the Holy of Holies are also clearly delineated in the Torah. In the original Sanctuary, the Mishkan, It was ten cubits by ten cubits square.

When the Ark was placed lengthwise in the Holy of Holies and one would measure from the northern wall to the Ark and then measure from the southern wall to the ark it would total ten cubits, as if the Ark was not there. Yet one could simultaneously measure the Ark and it extended for 2 ½ cubits. The same phenomenon occurred when measuring from the western wall (not to be confused with "the Western Wall") to the Ark and then from the eastern wall to the Ark; the total was ten cubits, despite the fact that the Ark itself occupied one and a half cubits!

The picture that emerges here is that the Ark – the place on earth that G-d chose to reveal His

presence in the most blatant and conspicuous manner – simultaneously occupied physical space and did not occupy physical space!

A similar phenomenon occurred when Moses came face to face with the burning bush. Moses marveled at the fact that the burning bush was a contradiction.

On the one hand, the bush was burning and on the other hand the flame was not consuming it. If the flame was not real fire, only the illusion of fire, Moses would have not been surprised. There were many instances of things that gave the appearance of something else. All of magic is where the magician creates the illusion of a phenomenon. If the bush was really on fire – and Moses presumably felt the heat – then how could it not burn? This was not just a miracle, but a manifestation of a G-d whose essence transcends the very order of logic.

What Really Happened on Chanukah?

Chanukah is celebrated because of the miracle with the oil of the menorah. Instead of burning one night, the Menorah lasted for eight nights. There are several approaches that have been

taken by some of the classical Jewish commentators as to what precisely happened.

One school of thought believes that there was a miraculous increase of the volume of oil. Though they put a supply of oil that would last for only one night, it expanded and it lasted for eight nights.

Another school of thought maintains that there was no quantitative increase of oil, but a qualitative increase. The power of the same volume of oil that existed before had now expanded to allow it to last eight nights instead of one.

There is, however, a third view that likens what happened on Chanukah to the miracle of the burning bush. This approach maintains that nothing, absolutely nothing, changed in the quantity or quality of the oil. If the oil had been measured it would not have been found to change in volume. Likewise, if the oil were to have been analyzed by a chemist, it would not have exhibited any properties that are foreign to pure olive oil. There was absolutely no change in the oil, yet, the oil lasted for eight days instead of one!

In other words, the oil though it was burning as oil usually does, and at the pace that it burns, it was not consumed! The oil was oil and wasn't oil at the same time!

Sinai Transformed Existence

In truth, this paradoxical phenomenon has become part of the world since the time the Torah was given at Mount Sinai. Before the Torah was given at Sinai, there existed two distinct realms. One was spirituality and the other was physicality. There was no way that there could be a fusion of the two. After all, how can a totally abstract, spiritual concept find expression within a corporeal entity?

At Sinai, not only did G-d give us a set of commandments, but, He also totally transformed the nature of existence. From then onward, the two distinct realms of the spiritual and physical can be synthesized.

Every time we perform a mitzvah that was given to us in the Torah, that physical object generates Divine energy. The Divine energy that is generated does not then reside in some spiritual domain, but is manifested within the

material world. Firstly, it is contained within the object with which the mitzvah is performed. Secondly, the spirituality resides within the person who performed the mitzvah. And thirdly, there is even some more spirituality "to spare" that will affect the world around as well.

That the two "worlds" of spirituality and materiality could be fused together is impossibility. G-d, however, possesses the ability to do the impossible as well. He can fit an elephant into the hole of the needle and He can introduce the Divine into the physical.

The Midrash uses the following parable to explain what happened at Siani:

> There were two city-states. One was Rome and the other was Syria. Rome was situated on the top of a mountain and Syria was in the valley. Their respective rulers decreed that none of their residents should be permitted to visit the other city. Thus, the leader of Rome decreed that the residents of Rome could descend to Syria; and the ruler of Syria ordered that none of his citizens may go up to visit Rome.

> Then one day, the Two rulers decided to rescind this decree. "Let the members of the mountain community descend to the valley and the members of the valley go up to the mountain top community." The ruler of Rome then added: "And I will be the first to begin the process." The ruler of Rome then descended to Syria.

The same occurred at Sinai. Prior to the revelation of G-d at Mount Sinai, there were two distinct forces: the spiritual and the physical. There was also a G-d given decree that the twain shall never meet. There is an inherent dichotomy that makes it unthinkable that one can put a spiritual force into a physical object as was explained earlier.

G-d, however, did precisely that. He annulled the decree between the upper and lower worlds. From now on the two realms will be synthesized, every time a person performs a physical act that was mandated at Sinai – a mitzvah. And furthermore," G-d added "I will be the first to commence with this new status." G-d then descended on Mount Sinai, transforming the physical mountain into a medium for G-dly revelation.

Despite the revolution that was launched at Sinai that allows for the synthesis of the physical and spiritual, the world does not necessarily feel the difference. Most people who perform a Mitzvah do not appreciate that they have just done the equivalent of splitting the atom and even more. Not only does the Mitzvah unleash incredible amounts of spiritual energy to the world, but it is manifested within the parameters of the physical action and object that was the Mitzvah.

The fact that we do not see or feel this fusion of the spiritual and physical worlds is by design. The world, had it realized the transformation it undergoes every time the right action is performed, would have been denied free choice to do the right things.

Only the select few in every generation, whose souls are on fire and to whom the secrets of Kabbalah were revealed, feel the excitement of every mitzvah.

During the Messianic Age all of us will be privileged to have that experience as well, because the supra-rational teachings of Kabbalah will be made accessible to the rational mind.

The Revolution

To return now to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter. How can the supra-rational teachings of Kabbalah be made accessible to the rational mind?

A follow up question to this first one is: If somehow, supra-rational teachings can be made accessible to the rational mind, why then were the teachings of Kabbalah considered to be so secretive and inaccessible to all but the elite?

Based on our analysis of G-d's lack of limitation we can begin to appreciate what has happened in recent times in the popularization of mysticism. We discussed the fact that if G-d so wills it even an elephant can pass through the eye of a needle if G-d so wants it – without the needle's eye expanding and the elephant going on a crash diet. G-d can therefore also take the most sublime non-rational ideas and make them rational and intelligible.

The Three Modes of G-dly Revelation

Kabbalah and Chassidic thought speaks of G-d manifesting Himself in three modes. The most common manifestation of G-d is His presence

within nature. *Elokim*, the name of G-d that is used frequently in the Torah and exclusively in the first chapter of Genesis that describes the creation of the universe, has the numerical equivalent of the word *Hateva,* (86) which means "the nature" or "the natural order."

When this aspect of G-d's power is revealed, everything conforms to a fixed pattern. Miracles do not occur, and the impression given by the world order is that there is a finite and inviolate system that governs the universe. When this G-dly force of nature is dominant, one can even fail to detect that it is G-d who is behind all of existence, including the laws of nature.

Indeed, the same word for nature "*teva*" derives from another Hebrew root that means submerged. This is a reference to the G-dly powers that are concealed within creation.

There is, however, a "higher" manifestation of G-d. When this second aspect of G-d associated with the name *Hava'ye,* or the tetragrammaton (Y.H.V.H.), is revealed, one sees G-d's involvement vividly. G-d's presence is no longer screened and cloaked within the parameters of nature. When this aspect of G-d is unleashed

we see miracles or changes in the way the world is governed. All the Biblical miracles as well as the post-Biblical ones, were illustrations of this G-dly power.

Even miracles, however, are expressive of an aspect of G-d's revealed nature and not His true essence. Miracles or super-natural evens too have their own parameters.

To be sure, miracles are far more spectacular than nature, but they too can be characterized as that which transcends nature. Just like nature is defined by its parameters, similarly the supernatural order can be characterized by its order. Nature is defined by its containment within borders, and the supernatural is defined by its inability to be contained within borders. That too is a limitation of sorts; one that cannot be ascribed to G-d Himself, to His very essence.

Thus, when the essence of G-d is in the open, even the parameters of miracles and the supernatural are removed. The inherent inability for something that is unlimited and transcendent to find expression within something that is limited and rational becomes eminently possible. When G-d's essence is revealed, even the most supra-rational teachings

of Kabbalah can be made rational and accessible to any mind.

The Essence Revealed in Messianic Age

This revelation of the essence of G-d is associated with the Messianic Age. During that period, the prophets declare, all barriers and covers that obscure G-d's essential being will be removed. In the words of Isaiah: "And your eyes will see Your Master, and He will no longer cloak Himself.'

Another verse speaks of how even "the flesh will see G-d."

All this points to that which has been said before that when G-d's essence is revealed, even the most natural and physical existence can perceive G-d the most transcendent being.

Because we are so close to this Messianic Age, we have been privileged in that G-d's most sublime secrets have been made somewhat accessible to the mind, as a sample and prelude to that which will be coming.

The Three Modes of Human Expression

To help us appreciate the differences between the three modes of G-d's manifestation to us, an analogy from the human condition can prove useful.

Most people behave in a prescribed manner. They have certain routines and certain things and people they relate to, while to some they don't. This is their nature and mold. When a person functions within the parameters of his/her nature, one can almost predict their every move and reaction. This parallels the level of nature, where G-d functions within prescribed laws and formalities.

There are times, however, when people are uplifted and in great spirits. Whether they just won the lottery, or found a new job, married off a child, or any other out of the ordinary happy occasion, the same individuals exhibit totally different behavior patterns. Their limitations that were programmed and locked into their psyche before seem to fade away. They can now do things that they never were expected to do.

Extreme joy – and to a certain extent tragedy – can transform a person, by enabling some of

the hidden reserves of energy he or she possesses becomes manifest. Their behavior can become rather unconventional. This parallels the level of miracles when G-d "opens up" and shows us His unrestricted identity and power.

There are times, such as when one goes through a terrible crisis, or when one is totally intoxicated, that the deepest forces are revealed. Even the most deeply held secrets suddenly find themselves being revealed to all. No limitations at all seem to remain. This is when the very essence of one's being comes to the fore. This parallels the state in which G-d sheds all "His inhibitions" and appears in His full essence and glory.

Third Stage: Removal of all Inhibitions

This third stage – wherein G-d's essence is revealed – is indeed what enables the most sublime secrets of Torah to be accessed by the rational human mind. Once the essence of G-d is revealed, there are absolutely no constraints, not even the constraints of logic and the impossible. This is why it has become possible for the most esoteric supra-rational aspects of

Judaism – Kabbalah – to be popularized and understood. We have entered a new era, in which the most basic limitations were removed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

OUR ESSENCE REVEALED

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OUR ESSENCE REVEALED

The Two Reasons Intertwined

We have discussed how the Jews' state of spiritual unconsciousness necessitated the introduction and popularization of the secrets of the Torah. We have also discussed how the accessibility of these supra-rational secrets to every human mind was enabled by the revelation of G-d's essence which transcends the parameters of both the natural and the supernatural.

As we shall see, the two points are related. The dire straits in which the Jews found themselves was actually the catalyst for the revelation of G-d's essential nature which allowed for the dissemination of mysticism.

Hidden Powers

This can be compared to a phenomenon that is mentioned in Kabbalistic sources as well as in medical writings. In times of grave danger - to a loved one, for example - hidden powers are released that enable people to do things they could not possibly do in normal times. People have been known to lift thousands of pounds of debris from a collapsed building that threaten to crush a child or squeeze through the narrowest of spaces to save a spouse from a deadly fire.

This unseen capacity is known in the terminology of Kabbalah as "*Cochot HaNe'elaminm*" - "The Hidden Powers."

Abraham's Test

When Abraham is tested to see whether he was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, the Torah employs the term "*nisah*" for the word "test." The root of this word is actually associated with the word for banner, ensign or flag. *Nisah* is also related to the word "*nes*" - "miracle."

Jewish thought, and particularly, Chassidic literature, emphasizes that G-d did not have to test Abraham to know that he was capable of

doing whatever G-d wanted him to do. The purpose of the test was to uplift him, just as a banner is raised high. He was uplifted because the test enabled Abraham to tap into the hidden forces he possessed and that were necessary for him to do G-d's will.

Imagine this! G-d asks Abraham to do the most unconventional thing imaginable - slaughter his own son! Particularly for Abraham, whose raison d'être was love and kindness for all, this test demanded that he reveal his essence so that he could do the very opposite of his first nature. Human sacrifice, moreover, went contrary to his theological beliefs. It was the most abhorrent and unconscionable thing for him to do.

Because Abraham elicited that aspect of his personality and soul that transcended all bounds and parameters, G-d responded in kind. G-d reciprocated, promising him that His covenant with Abraham and his descendants would never be severed. Even when his children would no longer be deserving of G-d's closeness, He told Abraham, G-d would always show them unconventional love that knows no bounds.

The same concept of revealing the deepest powers in a time of crisis applies to our era, as well. To describe our situation, Chassidic thought, as discussed earlier, employs the analogy of the king who realizes that the only way to save his son's life is to pulverized the crown jewel. G-d has allowed the most treasured and secret aspect of His being to be revealed to save his children.

Pulling out all the Stops to Silence the Cyncics

There is a Biblical and Midrashic model for this. The sixth weekly Torah portion, entitled Toldot, which discusses the children of Isaac, introduces its subject in a rather odd way:

> "These are the children of Isaac, the son of Abraham: Abraham begot Isaac."

Why the repetition?

Rashi, the principal Bible commentator, cites a Midrashic interpretation:

> "Since the Torah wrote, 'Isaac son of Abraham,' it was compelled to write, 'Abraham begot Isaac.' [This was] because the cynics of the generation

> were saying, 'Sarah became pregnant from Avimelech, for she spent many years with Abraham and she did not become pregnant from him.' What did the Holy One, blessed is He, do? He fashioned Isaac's face to resemble Abraham's, so that everyone attested, 'Abraham begot Isaac.' And this is what is written here - 'Isaac was the son of Abraham' - for there is evidence that Abraham begot Isaac."

In introducing G-d's response to the cynics, Rashi asks, "What did the Holy One, Blessed is He, do?" as if this were a dilemma for G-d. What is so unusual about this challenge that there is any question about what G-d could do? Furthermore, what is so miraculous about Isaac's features resembling Abraham's? Isn't it normal for a son to resemble his father?

Chassidic sources explain that Isaac did indeed need a "face lift" to resemble his father Abraham. Abraham was the epitome of *chesed* (kindness) and love. In an ancient Kabbalistic source we read of how "G-d's attribute of kindness 'complained' to the A-mighty that its job of exuding 'kindness' energies to the world

was taken over by Abraham." Abraham was not just a person who acted kindly, he was the personification and essence of kindness; it was an inseparable part of his being. Isaac, by contrast, personified the G-dly attribute of *gevurah* (severity). His entire life was devoted to rigorous self-appraisal and scrutiny. And he was demanding of others, as well.

The Torah tells us that the "wisdom of a person illuminates his face." Kabbalah reinterprets this adage to mean that a person's personality - whether kind or severe - is reflected in his facial appearance. The more powerful a certain personality trait the more it will be expressed in one's appearance.

Accordingly, by looking at Abraham one would see the kindness and love written all over his face. The face of Isaac, the epitome of severity, should have been so starkly different from Abraham's that there would have been absolutely no resemblance between them.

Thus the question of the Midrash: "What did the Holy One, Blessed is He, do?" This was no ordinary miracle where G-d performs plastic surgery without the needles, the scars and the pain. This situation was entirely different. Here,

G-d had to combine opposites. Isaac, the personification of severity, would have to radiate a look of absolute kindness. To make two extremes reside in one person called for a higher level miracle, one that transcended the very parameters of logic.

So we see why Rashi considered Isaac's resemblance to his father Abraham a tremendous miracle. What is curious is that G-d would make a miracle big enough to entail overriding His own parameters just so the scoffers would see that Isaac descended from Abraham.

If we look at the situation as a matter of a parent shedding his regular behavior to save a child in danger, the reason why the highest kind of miracle was required is no longer a mystery.

In the book, "Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust" by Yaffa Eliach, the author recounts the story told of a young man attempting to save his sister from the Gestapo. The Nazi officer tells him mockingly, "If you will grow hair on the palm of your hand I will let her free."

The young man opens his hand, and to the horror of the Nazi, his palm is covered with

hair. The Nazi starts to scream, releases the sister and shouts at both of them to leave. The narrator lets us in on the young man's secret: the hair on his palm was from a skin graft. Nevertheless, the man who saved his sister remarked, "If I hadn't had this hair, the love for my sister would have made me grow hair then and there."

Similarly, when G-d realizes that Isaac's - and, by extension the Jewish people's - very integrity and legitimacy is in question when Isaac's heredity is disputed, G-d, as it were, sheds all His "inhibitions" and "breaks out of His mold" to do the logically impossible in combining extremes to shape Isaac's face to resemble Abraham's.

We now understand why and how the teachings of Kabbalah were made accessible to the human mind in recent times. Because G-d saw how the Jewish people were in danger of losing their spiritual vitality and, indeed, their identity, hidden forces of Divinity had to be unleashed, enabling the most sublime supra-rational concepts to be introduced into the realm of rational thought and nature.

Hence the popularization of Kabbalah in modern times.

Eliciting Three Responses from G-d

We have noted, however, that there is another reason why Kabbalah has been popularized in recent times: our proximity to the Messianic Age. This calls for more explanation.

In Kabbalistic thought, we are taught that how and when the three modes of Divine expression - the natural, supernatural and the essence - are expressed very often depends on our behavior.

When the Mitzvot are performed in a perfunctory fashion - when their performance becomes routine - G-d responds by exhibiting His presence cloaked in nature. When this occurs, the natural order of the world is not upset, and, thank G-d, no tragedies occur. But by the same token, nothing out of the ordinary occurs, either.

When we start acting "miraculously," though, going beyond our own constraints in doing Mitzvot, G-d responds in kind and manifests Himself in a more open, supernatural way. It is

in times like these that we see miracles in our own lives and throughout the world.

When we go all out and express the very essence of our souls, G-d likewise removes all the "outer layers" of His personality and expresses His essence.

Generally this occurs in times of crisis, when we are prepared to give our lives for G-d and Judaism, shedding all the outer layers of our personality which seek self-preservation above all other concerns. Such self-sacrifice does not come from logic, emotion or even will power. It can only come when the very essence of our soul is revealed, that part of the soul that cannot ever be detached from G-d, even in the most insignificant way.

Beginning of this Process

What we have witnessed in recent times is the beginning of this process, in which the very essence of G-d comes to the fore and G-d's essential, paradoxical nature is evident. One of the manifestations of this process is the popularization of the deepest secrets of the Torah through the teachings of Kabbalah,

particularly through the Chassidic movement. Never before has a generation given of itself despite the darkness and concealment all around. The very essence of the Jew has come to the fore in an unprecedented manner. But to appreciate the greatness of our generation, we should first consider what has happened to Judaism in the past 300 years.

A Lesson in History

With the upheavals of the 17th century, the Jewish community was divided into two groups: those who had the luxury of being educated; and the majority, who were denied a Jewish education. The masses of "simple" Jews, although unlearned, were sincere and devout. What they lacked in intellectual sophistication they made up in their sincerity. Nevertheless, the intellectual elite looked at them condescendingly.

This was the general attitude until the Ba'al Shem Tov established, as part of his overall mystical philosophy, that these "simple" Jews were in fact spiritually superior in their service to G-d to the learned but haughty scholars. "G-

d's simplicity" (i.e., His undefined, transcendent state of being), the Ba'al Shem Tov declared, "was expressed in the simplicity of these Jews" precisely because they were ignorant (due to circumstances beyond their control and not because they chose ignorance, for that would have been an egregious violation of Jewish law).

The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that scholars, even sincere scholars, can at best capture the "intellectual" mode of G-d. By studying Torah, one's mind becomes attached to G-d's mind, which is inseparable from G-d's essence; nevertheless, what the scholar unites with is G-d as He is cloaked in intellect, not His essence. The simple Jew, however, expresses the very essence of his soul and is therefore able to relate to G-d's essence directly.

The Assault of the Enlightenment and Modernity

The next major attack on the Jewish people was the Jewish "Enlightenment" movement known as the Haskalah, and the Chassidic movement was a major response within Judaism to the Haskalah. With the advent of new freedoms

granted Jews in Western Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, the modern secularization of the Jew was put into motion. Scientific advances were employed in the assault against the Torah. The new theory of evolution and the different pseudo-scientific schools of Bible criticism, among other new disciplines, challenged all the basic tenets of Jewish belief

That Judaism survived the onslaught of the "Enlightenment-Haskalah" movement is testimony not only to the strength of Judaism, but also to the incredible spiritual depth of faith possessed by the Jewish people.

Their resistance to the new winds of secularism that were blowing did not cause the majority of Jews to waiver. This stubbornness was an expression of the quintessential stiff-necked nature of the Jewish people, in the positive sense of the term.

From the Enlightenment through Czarist persecutions and attempts to convert young Jews to the forced conscription of Jewish children (known as the cantonists) in the 19th century, most Jews remained steadfastly loyal to their faith.

The winds of the 20th century were far more powerful and claimed far more victims. The 20th century, in which the most spectacular medical and technological advances in history were made, is also the century in which more Jews were killed than in any other century.

Even before the Nazi monster reared its ugly head, the Communist regime in the former Soviet Union sought to mercilessly eradicate any and every trace of Judaism.

Parallel to these attempts, unprecedented in their wickedness, to destroy the Jewish people and their religion was the American tide of assimilation. In just two or three generations after Jews began flocking to these shores, the majority of Jews in this country have assimilated to an unprecedented degree. More than half of the estimated 6 million Jews in the United States are not affiliated with any Jewish religious institution.

The Revival

And yet we are experiencing a revival of Judaism. Thousands of young Jews have discovered that Judaism is for them. Having

abandoned their hedonistic lifestyles, they are prepared to accept the rigors of a Torah way of life with all its demands and restrictions. Judaism has never before seen a time such as today in which tens of thousands of primarily young people have emerged from a thick spiritual darkness to discover their Jewish souls and return to their ancestral ways without the aid of their parents and teachers, and often despite their elders' strong opposition.

Moreover, many of the young who have returned to a life of Torah observance have been responsible for bringing their parents with them.

Indeed, the very last prophecy recorded in the Bible, at the end of the Book of Malachi, speaks of how G-d will send Elijah the prophet in the before the Messianic period - to "restore the hearts of the parents to the children," which Rashi translates as "restore the hearts of the parents *through* the children." This prophecy has finally been realized, at least to a certain extent, in contemporary times.

This movement of return represents a qualitatively different process of Jewish awareness than what had been experienced

before. There is certainly a much greater expenditure of spiritual energy that is necessary to transform one's life than is required to merely carry on a tradition from one generation to the next. How has this occurred?

"The end is wedged in the beginning and the beginning [is wedged] in the end."

Kabbalistic and Chassidic thought explain, based on a statement in Sefer Yetzirah, one of the earliest books of Kabbalah: "The end is wedged in the beginning and the beginning [is wedged] in the end." The spiritual energies of the "End of Days" [a term used in the end of the Book of Daniel to describe the Messianic Era], are wedged in the spiritual energies of the beginning.

"Beginning" can be defined as either the opening G-d made at Sinai when he revealed the innermost essence of His being, thereby enabling the spiritual and physical worlds to meet and be synthesized, or the incredible flow of Divine energy introduced at the time of creation.

As we stand in the "End Days" we receive more powerful forces than we have received throughout the rest of our history, precisely because we are at the end, which is wedged in and benefits from the dynamic energy of the beginning.

Moreover, there is an enhanced measure of light that we can experience today that even surpasses that of Sinai.

Kabbalah makes reference to two types of spiritual light or energy: "*or yoshor*" - "straight light" and "*or chozeir*" - "reflected light." The force of a thrown object when it bounces off a wall (*or chozeir*) is greater than the force of the thrown object when there are no obstacles (or yoshor).

As we reach the End of Days, "walls" have appeared (due either to our own behavior or Divine design) that do more than just obstruct the spiritual energy. These obstacles, by presenting a wall of resistance, provide a power to the Sinaitic spiritual energy used today that is greater than the power of the spiritual energy that came directly from Sinai unobstructed. It is as if G-d shined a light at Sinai.

The farther the light travels, the fainter it becomes. As we get closer to the Messianic "End of Days," the light meets tough resistance because of the walls G-d has erected which obstruct the light.

This obstruction translated into the Generation Gap, wherein parents could not transmit their Jewish feelings to the next generation. There was a barrier preventing the light from continuing. But, by obstructing the light and not allowing it to go further, the energy actually bounced back with greater force than even existed at Sinai when the light was first generated and was at its strongest point.

In simple terms, the barriers that have been erected in our day and age actually help to elicit the most essential powers of our souls, which let us see through the darkness.

The Holocaust can be described as one of the darkest periods in history. The word dark is used here in the sense that the entire world simply allowed the German people to annihilate an entire people without anyone caring. The Jews that lived through this nightmare, and especially those who perished in it, could not

possibly see the presence of G-d in their suffering.

Unlike persecutions of the past, when Jews were forced to give their lives rather than convert to another religion, the Jews of the Holocaust could not even feel they were dying for a cause. Even that faint glimmer of light, which accompanied earlier persecutions of Jews, was denied the Jews of the Holocaust

And yet, despite the darkness, there were thousands of Jews who observed bits and pieces of Judaism, even in the death camps. Building Sukkahs, baking Matzah, lighting Shabbat and Chanukah lights, not to mention Torah study and prayer with Talit and Tefillin, were actions that actually occurred within the death camps themselves. Instances of Jews giving their last rations to be able to do a mitzvah or save a life are examples of unprecedented spiritual energy and light.

To see through total darkness and reveal light is a phenomenon that had never before been seen. That Holocaust survivors kept their faith, rebuilt their families and homes, started life anew and succeeded is testimony to a force of

G-dly energy possessed by these people which is unprecedented.

Oppression of Jews in the Soviet Union is one more saga that attests to the incredible G-dly energy that Jews possess and have revealed in this pre-Messianic Age.

For over seventy years the Soviet regime attempted to stamp out all vestiges of Judaism. Yet seventy years later, there are thousands of Jews whose souls are on fire. Young and old are undergoing circumcision, and in record numbers parents and children are flocking to Jewish institutions of learning to thirstily indulge in the pursuit of Torah knowledge.

Moreover, the heroism of thousands of Jews who did not give in to the Communist terror and continued to spread Judaism in Russia is further testimony to the unique response of Jews to G-d in the darkest period of their history.

From all of these examples of Jewish resistance and growth despite the barriers emerges a picture of a people who are in many ways far greater than their forebears. Our ancestors never experienced the darkness of our time. If

we have come this far it attests to our having revealed the very core of our divine souls. When we reveal our essence, G-d reciprocates and reveals His essence, and that is why we are now worthy of the revelation and popularization of the deepest secrets of Judaism. That is why it is our generation that is deemed worthy of the coming of Moshiach, because in spite of our glaring shortcomings, we are a unique generation.

The Connection Made

Now we can appreciate the connection between the two reasons why mysticism has been popularized in recent times: as an antidote to our lowliness; and because of our exalted state - living on the threshold of the Messianic Era.

These two apparently contradictory explanations actually complement each other. Our unique status as people, who have earned the revelation of G-d's innermost secrets, because we have revealed our inner souls, is directly related to our lowliness. What makes our spiritual efforts stand out is the fact that we have accomplished them in spite of our lowliness and lack of

spiritual sophistication. The light that comes out of the deepest darkness is the light that shines the brightest.